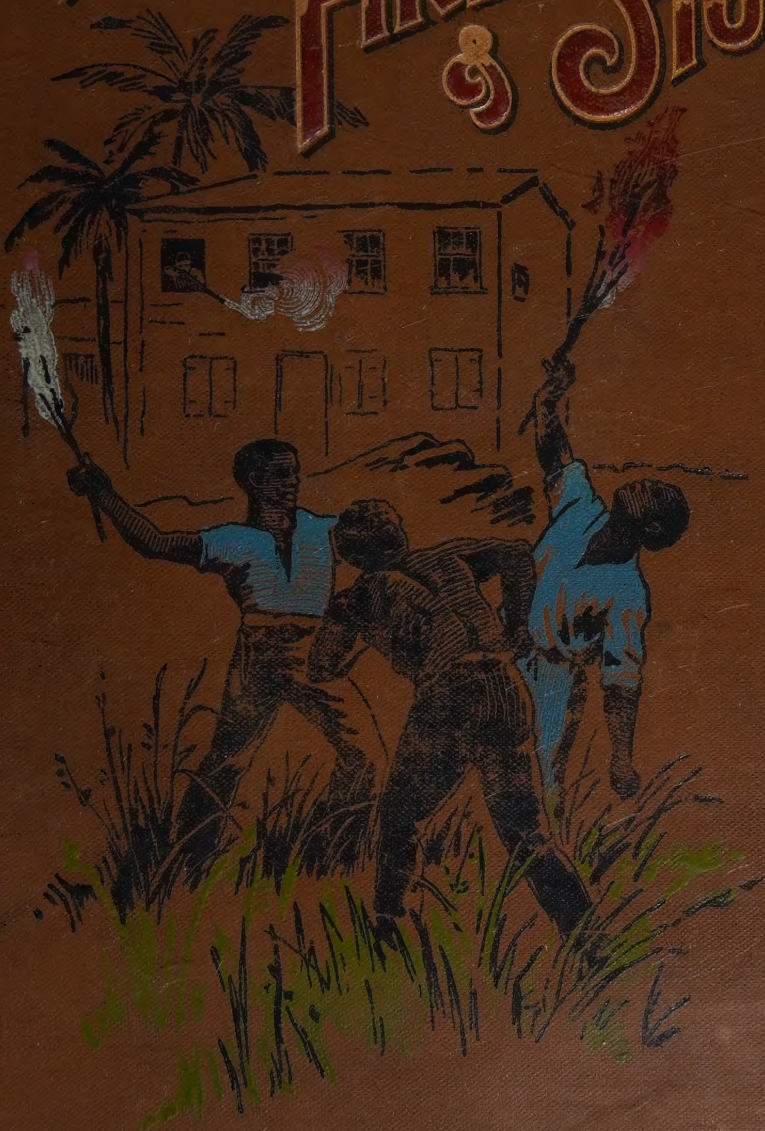


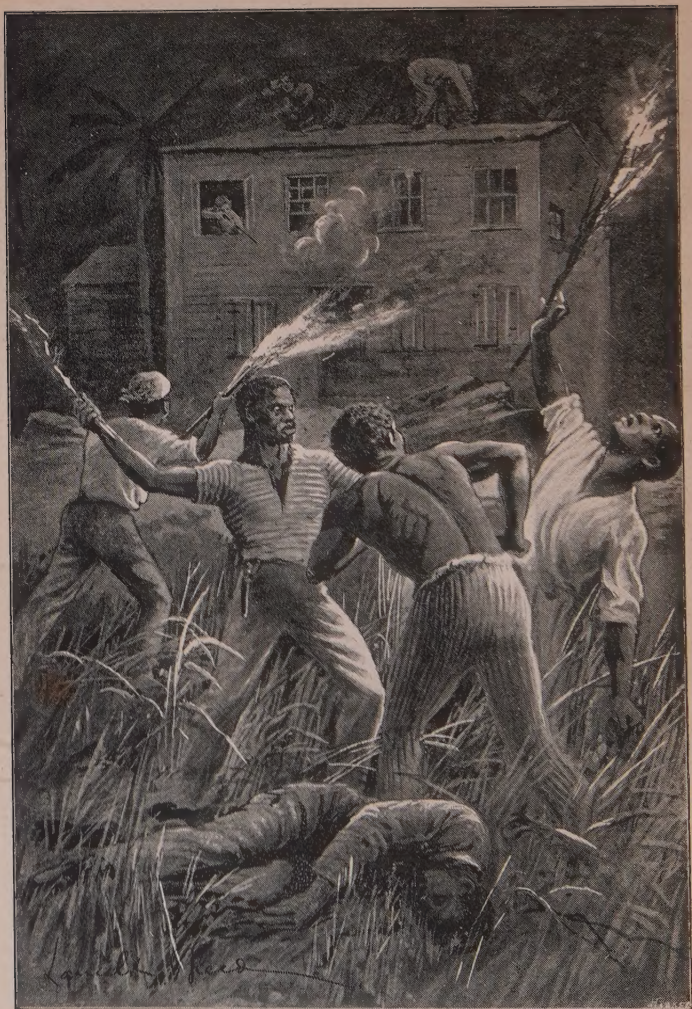
Through FIRE & STORM



THROUGH FIRE AND STORM







"THE BLACK TURNED HALF ROUND TO FLEE, BUT FELL THE NEXT
MOMENT."

THROUGH FIRE AND STORM

Stories of Adventure and Peril

BY

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JOHN A. HIGGINSON

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A DESPERATE GANG

A STORY OF THE AUSTRALIAN BUSH

By G. A. HENTY

CHAPTER I

A SHEPHERD'S hut of the roughest kind. It was inhabited by a shepherd and his wife—an unusual circumstance in Australia five-and-forty years ago, when a man and wife could generally obtain good wages—he as a farm servant, she as a washerwoman, or cook and helper. But John East and his wife, although on their first coming out they had no difficulty in obtaining such situations, had never kept them more than a few weeks, for they were as idle, shiftless, and helpless a couple as had ever been sent out to Australia, and that is saying a great deal.

They were Londoners, had married very young, apparently on the ground that as neither could get a living separately they would have a better chance of getting on together. The theory had not been justified.

John East had picked up a precarious living by occasional bits of work at the docks, by helping now

and then with a costermonger's barrow, with a turn at hop-picking in the autumn, and by such odd jobs as did not demand any great expenditure of labour. His wife sold boot-laces, songs, and other odd articles in the thoroughfares of an evening.

Sometimes, when times were specially bad, they went on the parish for a while; but this they objected to, principally because drink was not obtainable in the workhouse, and both were as fond of drink as of idleness.

At last some benevolent persons took them up and obtained a free passage for them and their boy to Australia, it being then, as now, the idea that people who will do nothing for themselves, are those for whom most ought to be done.

East and his wife consented to go, under the belief that every one could get rich out there without any great exertion, and their disappointment was extreme when they found that a man who would not work was just as likely to starve in Australia as in England.

They were hired a few days after they landed to go up country; but both arrived so drunk at the station that the farmer would have nothing to say to them. Hands, however, were scarce, and a less particular neighbour took them on at once; but he could not keep them long, and so they drifted from station to station until, at last, they found congenial employment at Waggoora, and settled down in a shepherd's hut five miles from the central station. Mrs. East had no special engagement, but they drew rations for two, as the boy, who was twelve years old, was considered to be able to give efficient aid to his father in looking after the sheep. In point of

fact, the principal part of the work was done by Bob, the husband and wife spending the greater portion of their time in sleep; their wages being spent entirely upon spirits, surreptitiously obtained from a wayside public-house twenty miles distant. Bob, at least, was happier here than he had ever been before; he was out with the sheep from morning till night, and if his share of the rations was small, he was, at any rate, far better fed than he ever had been before.

Except when in liquor, his parents were indifferent, when drunk they were brutal, and when he knew that, after the monthly pay, fresh supplies of spirits would be got in, he would, after getting something for supper, go out and sleep in the open air. Altogether, then, he suffered less than he had done when shut up with them in an attic in London.

Bob was of the usual type of the neglected London arab, utterly ignorant, and yet in many things precocious and sharp. Light-hearted in trouble, contented with the smallest piece of luck, uncomplaining in suffering, expecting no kindness, but grateful for it if it came.

In the year that had elapsed since he left England, the expression of his face had changed for the better; he no longer looked as if he were in constant expectation of a cuff, or a kick, or of a policeman laying his hand on his shoulder. The better food filled out his figure somewhat, and the life and fresh air had given a colour to his cheeks, and the sun had tanned him a healthy brown.

"Now you understand, Bob," his father was saying to him, "you are to get a month's rations except

meat—that you will only get for a week—and mind you don't get a-pitching into the sugar on your way back, else you will get it."

"I ain't a-going to take the sugar," Bob said indignantly. "I s'pose I am to say you are too busy to come in."

"That is it," the man replied as, lying on his back, he pulled at his pipe; "say I am perticular busy—can't get away nohow. And just you tell them, from me, as there are some natives squatting somewhere about here; two of them came up here yesterday and asked for flour, and did not seem best pleased because I could not give them any. I don't suppose there is anything in it, but that is one of the things they told me to be sure and let them know. Now, off you go, and don't you do any fooling by the way; we are clean out of meat, and tea, too."

Bob left the hut and started at once, going off at a trot until he was out of sight, and then breaking into a walk, whistling loudly as he went. "My eye!" he said to himself, "what a big place this is! I used to think as London was big, but it ain't nothing to this. I should like to go back just for a couple of days to tell Bill Giles and Red Sall and the rest of them about this place. Crikey! how they would open their eyes when I told them about the kangaroos, and they would not believe me if I said you could look all round as far as you can see, and nary a house to be seen, not even a bobby. It would be like, to them, fairy tales such as Esther Green used to tell me about. They would never believe it, not if I took my davey to it. Of course, there are drawbacks; when dad was drunk and out of temper at home, one could get a pennyworth of

pudding, and go and sleep under an archway or in an empty barge, and not come back again until he had got right. One can't do that here, there ain't a shop as I knows on for miles on, and though I don't mind sleeping out of doors, there ain't much fun in it when you ain't got nothing to put inside you."

Running and walking by turns, Bob was not long before he arrived at the station, a long, low building, with three or four huts for the men and horses, besides the house of the squatter.

The owner was standing at the door when he came up.

"Oh! so it is you, Bob East, come for your people's rations, I suppose?"

"Yes, sir, and please, sir, father told me something as I was to tell you—there are some natives about; two of them came to the hut and asked for flour. And dad has seen some others, and so have I."

"That is bad. I wonder what the black fellows are doing there? Tell your father I will send a couple of the natives out to the hut in the morning, and—no, I will ride out there myself with them and a couple of stock-men, at once. We will see what the blacks want, and give them a sheep, perhaps, to keep them in a good temper. I never like to hear of these fellows being near the place. They are treacherous scoundrels, and have been doing a good deal of harm lately."

He went round to the back of the house and shouted to his men, and in a few minutes rode away, followed by two of the hands and a couple of natives who worked about the house.

Having seen them off, Bob went to the store,

drew the rations, and then at once set out. He had walked about half the distance when he met one of the men galloping back : he drew rein when he came up to Bob.

"The boss says you are to go back to the house ; there has been trouble, and the blacks are out. Go back as fast as you can," and he galloped on.

During the year he had been in the colony, Bob had heard a good deal about the natives, and had often come in contact with them. He looked upon them with the contempt with which a London arab would naturally regard small black fellows, whose dress consisted almost entirely of an old blanket. He had often heard of the massacres at out-lying stations, but it had never occurred to him that there was any danger in the lonely hut his father occupied. Danger, to him, was associated with a crowd, with drunken men and public-houses. He had never dreamed of it in a place where he never saw a human being save his parents, except when he went in to fetch the rations, and he wondered vaguely, as he walked, whether anything had happened to his father and mother. Could they have been killed by these little black men ? There was no shuddering horror at the thought. He had had nothing but kicks and cuffs from them, and feared them vastly more than he loved them. In his precocious way he knew well enough that they had brought him with them solely because they thought he would be useful, and since they had arrived at the station the work of looking after the sheep had entirely fallen on him.

Several times in London, small as he was, he had run away, and for weeks had supported himself till

a spell of bad luck, or the desire to see how things were going on at home, had brought him back to them, and the prospect, therefore, of being alone in the world was by no means terrible to him. At present, any kindly feelings that nature might have given Bob were wholly undeveloped. So long as he could remember, no kind words had ever been spoken to him; he had been a small Ishmaelite, and every one's hand had been against him, and it was not his fault that the thought that, if his parents had been killed, he was henceforth free, was the first that occurred to him. The settler, whose name was Cookson, and the other white hand, came up to him just before he reached the station. The former dismounted, and told the man to lead his horse in.

"Did you see Evans, boy?"

"Yes, sir."

"Did he tell you anything?"

"He said there had been trouble."

"Nothing more?"

"No, sir."

"I have bad news for you, lad. The natives have attacked the hut—they must have done it a short time after you left—and I am sorry to say your father and mother were both speared."

"Speared!" Bob repeated; "do you mean they were killed, sir?"

"I am sorry to say that I do, Bob. It is a bad job, a very bad job; but if your father had been doing his duty, and had been out with his sheep as he ought to have been, it might not have happened. He would have had a chance of getting away, but he and your mother were both in the hut, and by appearances must have been lying down when the

natives rushed in and killed them before they had even time to rise. There was a bottle of spirits lying upset on the ground, and it looked as if they had been drinking. Of course, it was contrary to all rules to have spirits; however, it is of no use talking about that now. It is a bad business both for you and for me; you have lost your parents, I have lost a couple of thousand sheep."

Bob's countenance expressed no strong emotion.

"Aren't you sorry, lad?" the settler asked somewhat indignantly.

"I doesn't know yet," Bob said; "he were a desperate hard one, dad was, and he used to knock me about frightful, and she wur just as bad. They wasn't never no good to me."

The settler walked on without another word. He, too, had had what he considered a hard boyhood, but the indifference with which Bob had received the news of his parents' death shocked him; he could hardly imagine so hard and loveless a life as the boy had led, and in his heart he called him an unnatural young monster. However, he had other things to think of, and he hurried on to the station. The man who had first arrived had ridden off again, after telling the remaining hand to get up the shutters and load the guns, as it was possible that the blacks might attack the place. The second man was waiting when the settler came in, and had saddled a fresh horse in readiness for him.

"You had better wait here, Dick. I don't think there is any chance of the blacks coming back; still, if they are in any great force, they may have sent off a party with the sheep, and may attack us here. It is better to be on our guard, anyhow, so do you

and Harry keep a sharp look-out. The boy can watch if he does nothing else; but of course, if you are attacked, you will give him a gun. I expect I shall be back in three or four hours, and by that time, Evans will be here with the men he has gone for, and one of the blacks will have brought news which way the trail goes. Cut up that sheep we killed yesterday, and get as much meat cooked as you can by the time we are back. Set Harry to work making dampers; we may be away a couple of days."

By three o'clock, some twenty mounted men had ridden in all armed with rifles, and one of the blacks had returned half-an-hour before; he reported that some fifty of the natives had been engaged, and that all had gone off with the sheep. There was, therefore, no probability of any further mischief.

"Then I think, gentlemen, we had better start at once," Mr. Cookson said; "we have got five hours of daylight, we will ride as long as we can follow the trail, and then camp till daybreak. We ought to come up with them by mid-day to-morrow. I have had a sheep cooked, and there are a good stock of dampers ready, so there is nothing to wait for."

The food was put into three sacks and fastened behind the saddles, the water-bottles were refilled, and then the party mounted and rode off, leaving Harry and Bob only at the station. The former was an elderly man, who had been a convict, and was still on a ticket-of-leave.

"This is a bad job for you, young chap," he said.

"I dunno, Harry; they was mighty bad to me, both of them. They was bad enough when they were sober, and wuss when they was drunk. I have often wondered what was the good of fathers and

mothers, when all they did for a chap was to pitch into him continual."

"That was the way, was it?" Harry said.

Bob nodded. "They was the wust sort," he said.

"No good at all, eh? never kind to you, nohow?"

Bob shook his head decidedly. "They was wuss than nothing."

The ex-convict was sitting on a stool smoking his pipe; he planted his elbows on his knees and his chin on his hands, and looked meditatively at Bob. "There are some of them that way, boy," he said at last. "Perhaps it is better for you now that they was, then, you see, you haven't got yourself to blame afterwards. I would be glad now if my father and mother had been like that to me, because, you see, then I shouldn't sometimes be saying to myself what a bad lot I have been, and how my goings on had broken them both down. I wonder, now, how I could have done it, and though it is past and gone well nigh forty year, it comes back to me sometimes when I am alone; and, says I to myself, I would give a lot now if I had it, if I had stuck to them at home and taken to looking after the horses as father did, instead of taking to poaching first and then to other things. I never went back but once, and then I would not go in to speak to them. I just looked in at the window, and they was sitting by the fire. Father was holding mother's hand in his, and they looked old and broken-down like, and I knew that it was my doing."

He was silent for some time, then Bob asked—

"Didn't you go in, Harry?"

"No, lad, I couldn't bring myself to it. What could I do there? There was not one in the village

but knew I had been in quod. I could not have got work there if I had wanted it ever so much, and I don't know as I did want. When you once get in with a bad lot, it is mighty hard to draw back. I knew that if I had gone in, they would have been glad to have seen me, and would not have thrown things in my face; but then it would have been worse for them when I went away again, so I just turned and tramped back to London. I know I was wrong now, and I would give a good bit if I had plucked up and gone in.

"Well, well, it is forty years back, and I don't know that I ever spoke of it since, but it rests heavy, lad. All through one's life, it don't matter how old you grow, it is always there if you have been a bad son."

This was new to Bob: in his experience, bad fathers and mothers were much more common than good ones; but he could dimly see that if his father and mother had been good to him he should have felt differently now. He saw, however, that his companion had relapsed into silence, and that his thoughts were far away, and as his experience told him that when a man did not want to talk he was best left alone, he went quietly out and looked round the silent station.

CHAPTER II

ON the third day after their starting, the settlers returned. They had overtaken the natives, and recovered some eighteen hundred of the sheep, and had shot eight or ten of the blacks, two of their own

number having received spear wounds in the skirmish. On their way back they had stopped at the hut and had buried the bodies of the shepherd and his wife. One of the party had suggested that Bob should be sent for to be present, but Mr. Cookson had replied, "The young beggar did not care for them. When I told him what had happened to them, he took it as coolly as if they were people he had never heard of. If it had not been for that, I should have been glad to have kept him on. Boys are always useful about a place, but I was so disgusted with him that I should be glad to be rid of him, and if any of you would like to take him you are welcome to him."

"I will take him, gladly enough," one of the men said; "I want some one about the place, and it is no odds to me whether he was fond of his father and mother or not."

Mr. Cookson hesitated a moment. The man was a rough fellow, living entirely by himself, but as he had just been doing him a friendly service, and was one of those who had been wounded, while no one else put in a claim for the boy, he said—

"Very well, Johnson, suppose you take him then. He looks sharp enough, and I daresay you will find him useful. I expect the poor little beggar has had a hard time of it."

"He will be comfortable enough with me," the man said; "there won't be a great deal for him to do—only just to look after the place a bit while I am away."

So when the party returned, Mr. Cookson informed Bob that he had arranged for him to go with Mr. Johnson.

"Look here, lad," he said, "you had better not

make any long engagement with Johnson; engage yourself to him by the month, and then, if you are not comfortable, you can leave. I will settle all that for you before the others, and then there can be no mistake about it."

Bob guessed at once that his late employer had doubts whether the situation would be a comfortable one, but as he had nowhere else to go he made no objection. He had been accustomed to take what came in his way, and his consolation had long been, "When I get to be a man I can do as I like."

Mr. Cookson paid him the balance of wages due to his father, and made him a present of a pound. When he rejoined his companion, he said—

"I have been talking to the boy, Johnson, and he is ready to go with you, but he says that as he doesn't know you, he should like it to be a monthly engagement."

"Oh, very well, it makes no difference to me," the man said.

"What wages shall I tell him you will pay him?"

"Oh, I don't know; he will get his grub."

"Of course he will," Mr. Cookson said, "and something else besides, I suppose. There is not one of us who wouldn't be glad to get a sharp boy at a pound a month, even if he is only thirteen."

There was a murmur of assent, and Johnson said—

"Very well, then, I will give him that."

The settler called Bob.

"Mr. Johnson will pay you a pound a month, lad," he said, "and your engagement will be monthly, so that if you do not give him satisfaction he can at any time turn you off at the end of that time. It happens to be the first to-day, so at any time on the

last day of the month he can give you your money and send you off; and in the same way, of course, if you at any time feel that you will like a change, you will be free to leave him. If you do leave him, come over to me, and I will see that you get another place."

"Thank you, sir," Bob said. "I understand."

Half-an-hour later Johnson mounted his horse, and, with Bob walking beside him, started for his place, which was twelve miles away.

Many boys would have found Bob's new place a very dull and hard one, but it did not appear so to him. He cut wood for the fire, cooked, looked after the two horses, drew water, and kept the hut tidy. He was a great deal alone, for the settler was often out all day looking after some two or three hundred cattle on the station, and was sometimes absent for two or three days together. When at home he was silent and surly, but Bob had no actual ill-treatment to complain of, and was, upon the whole, happier than he had ever been before. There were two or three dogs about the place, and these became great friends with him, and as he went whistling about his work, or talking to them, there were no signs of unhappiness in his face. Occasionally his master had visitors. They generally rode up late in the evening, and on these occasions Bob was always sent out of the hut, his master doing the cooking and whatever was required.

The visitors often stayed the night, and Bob was never called in until they had gone. Being left to his own devices, he generally lit a fire a short distance away and camped out, sleeping with one or two of the dogs curled up beside him, or, if the weather was

wet, he slept in the hay-loft over the stable. There was no hardship to him in this, after sleeping as he had done many a night on a doorstep in bitterly cold weather at home. His master paid him his wages regularly, and each sovereign, as he received it, Bob placed in a little bag which he buried at the foot of a tree a quarter of a mile from the house. He often wondered who the visitors were, for none of them were of the party that had followed the natives in pursuit of the sheep. Once he crept up to the window to listen when two men had arrived; but peeping in he saw that each had laid a brace of pistols on the table before him, and therefore thought it best to retire hastily.

"I don't believe they are up to no good," he said to himself, "but it don't matter to me; they are good-natured sort of chaps, whoever they are;" for it was seldom the visitors rode off in the morning without throwing a shilling, and sometimes half-a-crown to him for looking after their horses. There was one, however, who was an exception: he was a big, savage-looking man, who was very particular about his horse being well rubbed down and groomed. One evening, when he arrived, the animal had evidently been ridden a very long distance. It was splashed with mud from head to foot, and though Bob had done his best, its coat was staring and rough when he brought it round in the morning.

"Yer young imp," the man said, savagely, "you haven't touched it, and I don't believe you have given it food or water either. I will teach you to neglect a horse in that way," and he made a step towards the boy as if to strike him.

Johnson put his hand on the man's shoulder as

Bob dropped the reins and darted off. He did not go far, and heard his master say—

“What is the use of being a fool, Slater? You know well enough the state the horse was in last night. The boy has done his best, and even if he hasn’t, I don’t want any row with him; he suits me well enough; he has got no friends or acquaintances, and it wouldn’t suit me if he were to leave. He does my work well, and there is no fear of his blabbing as to anything he sees.”

“I would put a pistol bullet through his head if I thought there was any fear of his blabbing,” the man said. “Just look at the horse.”

“Well, as you rode over eighty miles on him yesterday, Slater, on muddy roads, I do not think there is anything to grumble at. If I were you, I should try and make friends everywhere, and not enemies.”

“What do I care for enemies?” the man said, as he swung himself into the saddle, “or friends either, if it comes to that. I can look after myself.”

Johnson stood looking after him as he galloped off, shrugged his shoulders, and entered the cabin. Bob had been too accustomed to be sworn at to give the matter a thought, and was rather surprised that his master alluded to the subject when he brought in his dinner.

“He is a hot-headed chap that, Bob, and he was a bit put out this morning.”

“It ain’t nothing to me,” Bob said. “I had rubbed his horse for over an hour, and there weren’t no getting his coat smoothed. Bless you, I am used to being swore at; it don’t make no odds to I, but if he had gone and ’it me, I would ’ave made it hot

for him. I don't mind your hitting me, boss, not that you does it very often, but in course a boy expects to get pitched into sometimes; but he ain't got no right to hit me, not for nothing, and I would make it hot for him."

"What would you do, yer young whelp?" Johnson asked suspiciously.

"I dunno, governor; fetch him off his horse with a stone, perhaps. In course I might go and maim his 'oss, but I would not do that, 'cause I am fond of 'osses."

"Yer young fool," Johnson growled, "if you were to chuck a stone at him he would shoot you, as sure as you are born. You had best leave him alone."

"Then let him leave me alone," Bob grumbled. "You are my boss, and if he has got anything to say against me let him tell you, and you wallop me if I deserves it."

"All right, Bob; don't you think anything more about it."

"I ain't agoing to, boss; he didn't hit me, so it is all right."

CHAPTER III

GRADUALLY Johnson had been shifting his work to Bob's shoulders. There were two or three rough ponies running half wild on the place. One morning he caught one of these, and saddling it, had ridden round the place on it, instead of on his own horse; and on his return, he said to Bob, "Now you get up and have a ride. In future you are to keep this pony in the stable with the horses, and to ride

him yourself; then, when I am away, you can look after the cattle."

Bob was highly delighted, and, after a good many spills, learned to sit the pony well. As soon as he could do so, the care of the cattle was turned over to him not only when Johnson was away, but at other times. As soon as breakfast was over, he mounted and rode out, his work being to find and count the cattle, and if he found them too near the boundary, to drive them in nearer towards the station, returning in the afternoon in time to cook and get tea ready at five or six o'clock.

Bob enjoyed the change immensely. He had always envied the stockmen as they rode about, and he considered it a great step in life to be thus promoted. The first time Johnson went away Bob gave him ten shillings, and asked him to buy a stock whip for him, as the cattle paid very little attention to his shouts, and he soon learned to crack the whip with a sound like a pistol, and to get the cattle to mind him. He would have been perfectly happy now, had Johnson been a kinder master, but the man was of a surly temper, and it was always a word and a blow with him. Sometimes, for a week together, things would go on pleasantly, and then nothing seemed to go right, and the boy would be beaten on the smallest provocation. It almost seemed, indeed, as if, now that his employer found that he had completely settled down in the place, he no longer cared about curbing his temper, and that he vented his ill-humour upon him the more freely, because he saw that the boy made the best of things. Indeed, it did not occur to Bob that he might find an easier master; his experience was that being beaten was

the natural lot of boys, and that this was a necessary drawback to the pleasures of life. At any rate, when away on the pony he was perfectly happy.

One day Johnson told him that it might be three or four days before he returned. On such occasions the man always locked up the house before leaving, Bob sleeping in the loft over the stable. The guns, three in number, were always loaded and given to him in case any black fellows should come along. As none, however, had been heard of in the neighbourhood since the sharp punishment they had received after driving off the sheep at Cookson's station, Bob had no uneasiness on this account.

After Johnson had ridden away, Bob determined to put into execution a plan he had thought of for some time, namely, to break in the other ponies. He could now ride the one he used barebacked, and as one of the others was a much larger and stronger animal, he felt ambitious of bestriding it. He had seen it and its companion close to the station the evening before, and thought it was a favourable opportunity for making the attempt.

Accordingly, leaving the stock-yard gate open, he saddled his pony and started, and it was not long before he found the other animals, and after some trouble succeeded in driving them into the stock-yard. Then he changed the saddle to the back of the animal he intended to break in. He knew that it had been ridden before, for he had heard his master offer it to one of the men, who had come in with his horse lamed. He had some difficulty in mounting, but as soon as he was fairly in the saddle the animal quieted down, and he rode it round and round the stock-yard for some minutes; then he

opened the gate and started for the spot where he had seen the herd the day before.

The animal cantered along quietly, and Bob felt almost disappointed at finding its conquest so easy. He found upon arriving at the spot that the herd had moved away, and, as he saw by the traces, had gone towards the boundary. This was only marked by a line of blazed trees, and they had just reached this line when he overtook them. He began, as usual, to shout and crack his whip, but with an altogether unexpected result, for at the first crack the horse wheeled sharply round, seized the bit in his teeth, and went off at a gallop. Bob in vain endeavoured either to check its speed or to guide its course, and for a couple of miles it went at a racing speed. Several times Bob was almost swept from the saddle, and had the narrowest escape of being dashed against the trunks. At last he perceived that there was a clearing of some sort ahead, and congratulated himself that he should have an open country before him, when the animal suddenly swerved, almost brushing the trunk of a tree. It struck Bob on the knee, and hurled him from the saddle. He was stunned by the fall. When he recovered he tried to sit up, but fell back with a cry of pain.

After a time he again sat up; his leg was hurting him terribly, and he found that he was quite unable to move it in the slightest. He lay for a time wondering what was to become of him. Johnson was away for three days, and Bob was some four miles from the hut. There was little chance of his being found, and a terrible thirst already assailed him. As he thought of the clearing ahead, the idea that

he might be somewhere near another station occurred to him, and he shouted at the top of his voice. He thought he heard a cry in reply, and shouted again and again. Then, close by, a voice replied to him, and a moment later a girl of eighteen or nineteen was leaning over him. The relief was so great that he fainted. When he recovered, the girl was kneeling beside him, and had lifted his head.

"Where are you hurt, my poor boy?" she asked.

"My leg," he said. "The horse ran against a tree."

"I was afraid some one might be hurt," she said. "I saw a horse go by at full gallop without a rider, and I was coming to see if any one had been thrown off when I heard you call. Our house is only a quarter of a mile away. I must go back and get assistance. I will not be long gone."

"And send some water, please," Bob said. "I am that dry, I feel as if I could drink a bucketful. And my leg does just hurt."

"I will bring you some water back," the girl said. "Now, you lie quite quiet until I return."

CHAPTER IV

It seemed a long time to the boy, though it was but a quarter of an hour before the girl returned with a man. She gave Bob some water. Then he was lifted on to a hand-barrow. The man took the handles at the head and the girl at the feet, and they at once started.

He fainted again from the agony of being moved, and when he opened his eyes he was lying on a bed.

"You will do now," the girl said, as he looked round. "I have sent for my father; he will know what is best to be done."

"Get your scissors, Jane, and cut open the trouser leg," another woman said. "The best plan, at any rate for the present, will be to bathe it with warm water. Where do you come from, my lad."

"I work at Johnson's," Bob said; "there is no one there now. He has gone away this morning for three days."

"Well, it makes no difference," she said; "for you could not be moved anyhow. We will take care of you, and better, perhaps, than you could be cared for at Johnson's, for there are no women there."

"I should think so," Bob said heartily. "I am orful obliged. I am afraid I shall be a lot of trouble."

"Oh, we must not mind that," the woman said kindly. "Neighbours must help one another, you know, in this country, and as there are two of us we shall be able to take it in turns to look after you."

Half-an-hour later a man joined the party.

"Who is it, Martha?"

"It is a boy who works at Johnson's, Richard. It seems his horse ran away with him, and knocked his leg against a tree. Jane was in the garden when the horse galloped past, and as she saw that it had a saddle on and no rider, she thought something must have happened, and went in the direction from which it came. She heard a cry just inside the wood, and soon found him. As he couldn't walk, she came back, fetched John, and they brought him in. His knee is terribly swollen, you see."

"It is," the man said, examining it. "We must let Johnson know at once, though, of course, he can't be moved."

"Johnson has gone away for three days, he says."

"Very well, then, John must get on a horse and ride to Bala and fetch Ferguson. His leg must be seen to. It is beyond us altogether. It is a happy thing that Jane saw the horse go by. Poor little chap, he might have lain and died in the wood if she hadn't found him when she did."

"I am orful sorry being such a trouble, mister," Bob said. "I always seem to be a trouble, somehow, and I don't go to do it."

"It can't be helped, my boy. Don't you worry yourself about it. All these things come in one's day's work, and we should be thankful that my daughter came upon you so soon, and that it has been the means of saving your life. We will let Johnson know you are here. I will write a note and send over and have it fastened to his door, so that he may see it as soon as he comes back."

"And please, sir, will whoever takes the note give some water and oats to the horse in the stable. There is no one to look after him."

"That shall be seen to, lad. It is thoughtful of you, being in such pain yourself, to think of the horse."

Late in the evening the doctor arrived, Bala, the nearest village to the station, being twenty-five miles away. He examined the knee, hurting Bob frightfully as he did so.

"It is very difficult to give an opinion now," he said to the settler. "The swelling is so great that I can say nothing for certain; but I should say that

the knee-cap is fractured. The first thing is to reduce the swelling, and for that nothing can be better than to keep on bathing it with hot water, as your wife has been doing. At night keep damp cloths on it. He is likely to be light-headed before long; if he is, keep him strapped down to the bed, so as not to be able to move his leg. He won't want to eat anything. Give him cold tea very weak; but in a day or two, when the fever subsides, he can have beef-tea. I will put on splints now to prevent any movement, and will come over again in five or six days to see how he is getting on. By that time the swelling will have gone down, and I can bandage the leg up with splints properly. I am afraid it will be a long job before he is about again."

For the next three or four days Bob knew nothing. He had a vague idea that occasionally drink was held to his lips, but beyond that knew nothing. It was fortunate that the settler's wife and daughter knew little of the language of the London slums, and were unable to understand the meaning of the words that poured from his lips as he raved wildly in his fever.

"He must have led a hard life, Martha," the settler said, shaking his head, after standing some time beside the boy's bed; "he must have been brought up in the London streets, I should say, and have been very badly used. Johnson told me this morning, when he rode over, that the boy was the son of the shepherd and his wife who, if you remember, were speared by the blacks at Cookson's station about a year ago. I expect he has had a hard time with Johnson, too; the man is a very rough fellow, and seemed more angry than sorry at the boy's

injury. I handed him over the pony, and he said the boy had no right to have mounted it, as it hadn't been ridden since he first had it, eighteen months ago. However, he said that the boy wasn't a bad boy, and was a willing worker; and indeed I could see that he considered the loss of his services to be a serious one. He spoke quite savagely when I told him the doctor said that it would be many weeks, in any case, before he would be able to use his leg again."

On the fifth day the fever abated. Bob lay weak and helpless on the bed; the swelling in the knee had already greatly subsided, and when the doctor came two days later, he was able to examine it properly.

"The knee-cap is certainly fractured," he said; "if it had been a man, I should have no hope of his ever being able to walk again except with a stiff leg; but being a boy the bone may knit. He has been leading an active outdoor life, and that is all in his favour. Have you got some starch?"

"Certainly we have, doctor."

"Then, please, make me a basin of stiff starch. I want it for the bandages. You see, putting them on wet they harden up as they dry, and make a perfect case to the knee. Then I put on the splints over them, and there is no possibility of movement. In three weeks 'or so the bone will have knit, if it will ever do so. It will be of no use my coming over again before that. The joint will be stiff for some time, but he will have to use it as much as he can; gently, of course, at first, but in time he may quite get the use of it again."

It was two months, indeed, before Bob was able to

walk, even with a stiff leg ; but, in spite of almost constant pain, it was the happiest time he had ever passed.

When the fever had abated, Mrs. Suter had handed him over to the care of her daughter, who had, whenever she could be spared from the housework, spent her time in sitting beside him, talking or reading to him. His utter ignorance of everything had at first greatly shocked her.

"It is terrible, mother," she said ; "he knows nothing whatever of God, beyond having a vague idea that people go to church in some way to talk to Him. He does not even seem to have cared in the least for his father and mother. I asked him about them, and all he said was, they was bad 'uns, and used to whop him terrible. Isn't it shocking to think of?"

"It is terrible, my dear ; maybe in his case his misfortune will be a blessing to him. You must do what you can to teach him."

And this Jane Suter did to the best of her power, though greatly shocked at first by Bob's unintentional irreverence.

Bob's gratitude to those around him, and especially to Jane Suter, was unbounded. He had never known kindness before, and that these strangers should take such pains and trouble, should wait upon him, and sit up with him at night, was a source of boundless wonder. As soon as he was able to get up, he had been eager to do what he could to assist in the house, and only desisted from his efforts when Mrs. Suter said, "We know, Bob, that you will be glad to help, but, in the first place, Jane and I have always done the housework without assistance, and

can do it now; and in the second place, if you were in any way to hurt your knee, you might be laid up again for weeks, and might walk with a stiff leg to the end of your life. So you see you can help us most by keeping yourself perfectly quiet, and getting quite well as soon as possible."

"Shouldn't I just like to come and work for you," the boy said to the settler. A day or two before, the surgeon, having had occasion to visit another patient in the neighbourhood, had examined his knee, and pronounced that he was now able to go to work again about a house; but that he must not think of riding, or indeed of doing anything that might throw a sudden strain on his leg for weeks to come. "I should like to work for you and Missus Suter, and Miss Jane."

"Well, some day, perhaps, Bob, we will see about it. There are several reasons against it at present, the principal of which is that it would not be fair for us to take you from Johnson."

"Not fair, sir?"

"No, my lad."

"I am only engaged to him by the month, sir."

"I know that, my boy; and no doubt legally you could leave him at a very short notice; but that would not be fair. You see, to begin with, he has waited more than two months for you to come back again. He said when he was over here the other day that you suited him very well, so that he had not taken anybody else on. In the second place, you see, this accident of yours was to a great extent your own fault, owing to your taking upon yourself to break in that pony without asking leave to do so. Owing to that, you see, not only have you suffered

a great deal, but he must, of course, have been greatly inconvenienced, and it is only right that you should make it up to him as much as you can. I have no doubt, when he took you, it was chiefly because he thought you would be useful, and not merely from pity at your lonely condition. Still he did take you, and you have learnt to ride, to look after cattle, and to cook, and to be useful in many ways; it would hardly be fair to throw up the place suddenly, even if only on that account. I should not like it myself if I had trained a boy, and he were to go off to another settler at the first opportunity. Those are the reasons why you ought to stay with him, I think. Then, as for myself, there are reasons why I would not take you now. In the first place, if I were to do so Johnson would be very much offended, and, though I have only seen him once or twice before you came here, and he is in no way a friend, it is not pleasant being on bad terms with your next neighbour. Then again, although your leg has recovered enough for you to be useful to him about his place, you would not be of any use here, for you see my wife and daughter do all the work about the house. And, lastly, Bob, I cannot afford to take on another hand at present."

"I would work without wages, sir, gladly," Bob said eagerly.

"Thank you, lad; but though you might be willing, I should not. It would not be fair for me to have any one working for me without pay. However, the other reasons are quite sufficient without that, and I think that at any rate for six months you ought to go back to your employer. You tell me that upon the whole he has been kind to you, and

had it not been for this accident that you would not have thought of leaving him. So stay there for a bit longer, and after that, perhaps, we may be able to arrange for you to come here."

Bob had expected a refusal, for no word had been said as to his staying permanently with the Suters. Still it required an effort to say cheerfully—

"Thank you very much, sir; I will go back to Johnson till you can take me; but you have all been that good to me that I would a sight rather work for you for nothing than I would for any one else, not if they paid me ever so much."

CHAPTER V

JOHNSON came over again three or four days later, and was evidently pleased to hear that Bob would return on the following day.

"I will drive him over in my cart," Mr. Suter said; "the boy is anxious to get to work again. Ferguson says he is fit to do anything now about the place, but that he will be some time yet before he is fit to look after cattle, and that he must be very careful with his leg for a time."

"All right," Johnson replied, "I will look after the herd myself. I shall be glad to have him back. There ain't much for him to do about the place, but what there is he does as well as any boy could. I am sure I am very much obliged to you all for the trouble you have taken with him."

So Bob fell into his old work again. He felt lonely at first, but he had a good deal to think of; a new side of life had been shown to him. He was

no longer an outcast without a friend in the world, and he yearned with a passionate desire to be able to show in some way his gratitude to those who had shown themselves such good friends to him. During his stay with them they had asked no questions whatever as to his employer, except whether he was kind to him, and Bob had said nothing about the visitors at the station. Without knowing anything, he had a sort of feeling that Johnson would not care for their presence there to be known, and a certain sense of loyalty towards him had sealed his lips on that subject. They still came and went, sometimes stopping only a few hours, sometimes for days.

The season was a bad one. Summer had set in, the heat was unusually great, and no rain fell for months. The streams dried up, and there was, as he heard from Johnson, a terrible drought of water. They were better off at their station than at many others, as the trees gave shelter to the cattle, and there was a very large water-hole where the stream had been dammed up, and, although even this shrank to almost nothing, the cattle browsing on the undergrowth on the grass under the trees did much better than the animals in the open country. There the losses of sheep were terrible, and Johnson, after an unusually long absence, brought back a sad story of distress.

Bob had, two months after his return, again taken charge of the cattle; they needed but little looking after now, as they never attempted to wander, but spent most of their time lying in the shade near the water-hole, which was surrounded by a stout fence, that was only opened now to allow them to have a drink every other day. Three or four times Bob had, when Johnson was away, ridden over

to the Suters'. Theirs was a sheep run, and the flocks were suffering greatly from want of water. He was always welcomed kindly, but he could see that they were very anxious. Numbers of the sheep had died, and the loss would have been even greater than it was had it not been for the shelter of the wood, where the sheep gathered during the heat of the day, and picked up some little sustenance.

"I can't make it out at all, Miss Jane," Bob said, one day. "You told me that it was God who sent you to find me that day I was knocked off the horse. Well, if He looked after an ignorant chap like me, how is it He don't look after such good people as you are, saying your prayers regular every day. I have been thinking it over, and it beats me altogether."

"God does what He thinks best, Bob, not what we think best. His ways are not our ways, He knows what is best for us, and this trial may be meant to bring us nearer to Him. Of one thing we may be sure, it is for our good. You did not think that day, when you were lying with your knee broken under the tree, that it was for your good, but you see it was."

"So it was, Miss Jane; I never thought of that; but it is hard to understand, ain't it?"

"It is, Bob. All we have got to do is to trust in Him, and we may be sure all will come well in the end, however dark things may look to us."

"I wish it had been some other way," Bob said mournfully. "I lays awake at night and thinks of it, and it do seem hard that, when you are all so good, the sheep should be dying off like winking. Oh, there is one thing I wanted to tell you. Johnson said yesterday before he started that I must look out sharp, for he heard there were some natives about."

"They won't drive off the sheep, Bob; the poor creatures couldn't travel five miles."

"No, miss, I don't suppose they would try to take sheep, but they might attack the station. They are a bad lot, them blacks."

"I will tell my father, Bob; it is just as well to be careful, anyhow. That is what you have got a gun with you for, I suppose?"

"Yes, miss. Johnson told me when I first went to him that I had better always have a gun handy when I heard there were blacks about. That is why I won't stay any longer. I don't like being away from the place long when they are about."

"I should think it were better that you were away from the place, Bob; you could not do much if you were alone against a number of natives."

"I don't suppose I could, miss; still, I should do my best. Of course, I could not try to do anything for the cattle, but I might defend the house for a bit; the dogs would be sure to give me notice if they were coming."

"You could not hold the place, Bob, even if you did shoot some of them. They would be sure to set it on fire, and you would be only throwing away your life, and there can't be anything at the station worth your doing that for."

"Perhaps not, miss, but he told me to guard it, and I am going to, just as long as I am able, though if I see there's too many of 'em to give me a chance, I shall bolt if I can. You said one day to me, every one ought to do their duty, and I am going to do mine as far as I can. He is a surly chap, Johnson, but he don't treat me bad."

"How long has he gone for this time, Bob?"

"He said he might be away a fortnight, miss. He asked me if there was anything I wanted, and I expect he is going down to Sydney."

"It is a shame, leaving a boy like you by yourself at such a lonely station," the girl said.

"Oh, I dunno, miss; it don't make much odds to me whether he is there or not. He don't talk much, he don't, and, you see, I can come over here when he is away, and I can't at other times. I would just as lief he was away as not. Well, good-bye, miss. Good-bye, Mrs. Suter, I am sorry I can't stay till Mr. Suter comes in from work."

The next day Bob was roused soon after daybreak by the sound of galloping hoofs. He opened the little trap in the roof that served as a window and looked out. The cattle were thundering past, and behind them ran a mob of natives, who were apparently trying to turn them.

"My eye! here's a go," Bob said to himself, withdrawing his head hastily. "Wot's to be done now? I expect they have been trying to drive the herd off; but they smelt them and went off the other way. They will be some time before they catch them, and then I expect some on 'em will drive them up country and the rest will be attacking here. The way they were going will take them somewhere near Mister Suter's; perhaps they will attack them first; if he and the two men are away there will only be Mrs. Suter and Miss Jane there. What had I better do? If I stay here I can't do no good—there are fifty of them and more; if I did shoot two or three afore they broke in, that wouldn't be no good."

He had run down the ladder by this time, and was saddling Johnson's second horse.

"The boss thinks more of him than he does of anything else," he said; "if I can get him off, he won't so much mind the place being burnt. Besides, if I can get to Suter's in time, he may get some men together and save the cattle; that will be better than stopping here and getting killed for nothing."

He slung a rifle behind him, took the double-barrelled gun, which was loaded with buckshot, in one hand, opened the stable door, led the horse out and mounted, and then galloped off at full speed. He followed for a while the track of the cattle, which was plain enough, and then bore away somewhat to the right. Half-an-hour's hard riding brought him to the edge of the wood. Close to the trees, a quarter of a mile on his left, he saw a crowd of figures.

"They have overtook them," he said. A moment later he heard a distant shout. "They see me," he muttered. "Well, I shall be there first." He saw a number of natives detach themselves from the group and run towards the station, which was about an equal distance from the two points. Bob would be there first, he knew, but it would be a close thing, for in the quarter of a mile that remained to be traversed, he could not hope to gain a hundred yards. "There won't be time to bar the windows," he said to himself; then an idea struck him, and he fired off both barrels of the gun one after the other.

A few seconds later he saw Jane Suter come to the door and look round. He waved his gun over his head and yelled at the top of his voice—

"The blacks! the blacks! bar the windows."

She had heard him, for she disappeared at once.

He was some seventy or eighty yards ahead of the natives when he reached the door of the house.

He leaped off, dragged the horse in through the door, and then bolted and barred it, and ran to assist the women, who were, as he heard, fastening up the shutters.

"Have you done them all, Miss Jane?" he cried as he ran into the kitchen.

"Yes, this is the last of them."

"I brought the horse in, Miss Jane; you won't mind that? it is the only thing of Johnson's I could save. Now I will run upstairs and give it 'em."

Jane Suter reached down two guns from a rack over the fireplace, and followed him.

"I will help load, Jane," Mrs. Suter said quietly. "I should be of no use shooting."

As he reached the upper room, Bob unslung the rifle, ran to the window and threw it up and fired at the four natives who had first arrived, and were now standing in a group awaiting the others, having found the door and windows already fastened.

One of them fell; the other three discharged their spears at the window, and then ran round behind the shelter of an outhouse.

Bob sprang back as he saw them raise their arms, and it was well he did so, as two spears flew in through the window. He was reloading the guns when Jane Suter entered the room.

"There are shutters to all these windows, Bob; the first thing to do is to shut and fasten them."

The shutters, which had been made for defence, were of stout plank, in which narrow slits had been cut to enable the defenders to fire through in case of an attack.

"What is the next job, Miss Jane?"

"You take this window, Bob, and don't let any one

come up to the front of the house. I will take a window at the back. The windows downstairs are all front or back, so that they cannot attack at the sides. What will father do, Bob, if he hears the firing? They will spear him if he rides up."

"I will keep a look-out for him on this side, miss, if Mrs. Suter will look out at the side he is most likely to come from; then, when we see him coming, I will open the shutter and shout out that I am here, and tell him we can keep them off for a bit, and that he had better ride to the other stations; for he will be killed as sure as a gun if he comes down. There are fifty of them chaps, if there is one."

Mrs. Suter now came into the room.

"We are in God's hands, my dears; before we do anything else, let us pray for His protection in this time of danger."

They all knelt, and Mrs. Suter prayed fervently for two or three minutes.

"It will be all right now," Bob said confidently, as he rose to his feet. "You told me, Miss Jane, God sent you to me when I got knocked off the horse, and it ain't likely when He takes care of a chap like me, as he wouldn't take care of you too when you have asked Him."

"I think, Bob," Mrs. Suter said, "that my daughter had better remain up here, and that you had best go downstairs; they are sure to get up close to the house, in spite of what we can do, and you must try and keep them from breaking in."

"All right, mum," Bob said cheerfully, "I will give it them if they try any tricks down there."

Going down, Bob examined the doors, which were both so strong and heavily barred that he felt sure

the natives could not break in there. The shutters in the four rooms on the ground floor were loopholed in the same way as those above ; he placed himself at one of them, put the barrel of the rifle against the loophole, and then stood with his finger on the trigger looking along the barrel.

In two or three minutes the loophole was darkened, and he instantly fired. There was a yell and the sound of a heavy fall.

"There is one on 'em," Bob said to himself. "I wonder whether it is one of the chaps who did for father and mother?"

He proceeded to load again, and, as he did so, he heard two shots ring out from above ; then, for a time, all was quiet again. He walked from room to room, stopping to pat the horse, who was standing in the passage.

"This is a rum go, ain't it, old man?" as the animal rubbed his head against him. "You are better here by a long way than you would have been if you had stopped in the stable. Yes, I know, you want something to eat ; I will ask Mrs. Suter for a piece of bread for you presently."

In a short time, he heard Mrs. Suter call from above, and he at once ran upstairs. "We think perhaps after all you had better stay here, Bob. What we are most afraid of is fire, and we must keep a sharp look-out from all the windows."

They heard Jane call, and ran to her.

"They have set fire to the stables," she said ; "fortunately the wind is the other way."

"It is lucky all three horses are out," Bob said ; "we will soon build the stables up again, Miss Jane. That smoke will bring your father back ; like enough

that is what they did it for ; we had better look out for him."

In ten minutes they caught sight of three figures riding at full speed across the plain.

CHAPTER VI

"WE must open the shutter," Mrs. Suter said, "and throw up the window ; only look out, Bob, in case they crawl round this side."

"I will look out, mum ; they had better not show themselves round here. Hadn't I better fire a shot ? I expect Mr. Suter thinks it is only an accident ; if they hear a gun, they will know what it is, and will be keeping a sharp look-out."

As soon as the window was opened, Bob fired his rifle. They saw the three men rein up their horses at once, and then after a moment's delay, come on at full speed.

"They ain't above a quarter of a mile away," Bob said, "I can make them hear ;" and he gave them an ear-piercing yell of "Stop !" It was evidently heard, for the riders checked their speed, and on coming a hundred yards nearer, paused in consultation ; then Bob yelled again, "Mr. Suter !" An answering shout came back.

"Don't you come no nearer, sir ; there are fifty of the blacks round here, and they will stick you all full of spears, as you ride up. Me and Miss Jane can keep them off till it gets dark. Will you go and get help ? You can't do nothing by yourselves."

Mrs. Suter came to the window now ; just as she came up a spear flew in, Bob's attention having been

occupied entirely with the riders. Before the native could dart back to shelter, Bob fired both barrels of his gun at him, and he fell headlong. Then Mrs. Suter cried out in a voice that quite startled Bob, it differed so much from her usual tranquil way of speaking, "Keep away, William. Get help; we shall do till night. They will only kill you if you come close."

There was a consultation between the three men; then the two farm hands turned and galloped off at full speed.

"I shall keep near," Mr. Suter shouted. "I won't come within reach of their spears, but I can't go away."

He rode to a spot a hundred yards to the left, and took his station on somewhat rising ground, from which he could see in all directions. Then he dismounted and stood at his horse's head, watching what was going on at the station. Having had no apprehension of an attack—for, absorbed in the sufferings of his flocks, he had paid but little attention to the news that the blacks were in the neighbourhood—he had ridden out unarmed, save with his heavy stock whip. To attempt, then, to ride up to the house would be madness, for he would not only throw away his own life uselessly, but he would imperil the safety of the defenders of the station, for these would open the door when they saw him riding up, and the natives might, with a rush, be able to gain admittance.

As soon as they saw that he was in safety, Jane Suter and Bob closed the shutter and returned to their posts. Mrs. Suter brought up two other guns that were below, and placed one projecting through the upper loopholes on each side of the house, so as to deter the natives from approaching on the un-

guarded sides. Bob first went with Jane to the rear of the house; the fire had extended from the stables to the other sheds, which were now all in a blaze.

"I wish they would show themselves," Bob exclaimed. "It is a bad job, isn't it, Miss Jane?"

"It is a heavy loss, Bob; but it is fortunate for us that they have set fire to the stables."

Bob looked at her in surprise. "Why, how is that, miss?"

"They gave them shelter, Bob; when they are all burnt to the ground, which they will be in another hour, they will have nowhere to hide behind. They will see that themselves presently, and will know that their only chance is in setting this house on fire before the outhouses are all burnt down. You had better keep on this side with me for the present. What a blessing it is the smoke blows the other way! If it had come here, it would have hidden them from us, and they could have built up a fire against the house without our knowing anything about it until it was too late."

Bob went to the window of the next room, and kept his eyes fixed on the corner of the burning shed round which the natives must come if they advanced to the attack. For a quarter of an hour nothing was to be seen of them; then suddenly a score of dark figures carrying blazing brands rushed forward. Bob fired his rifle into them, and then the two barrels of buckshot. Several fell, and as he began to reload, Mrs. Suter handed him another double-barrelled gun from the loophole, where she had before placed it. The two discharges completed the confusion of the blacks, who, picking up their wounded, ran hastily back into shelter. The instant Bob had loaded

one of the guns, he ran into the next room, for the reports of Jane's guns showed that the natives had attacked on both sides of the burning building. The danger, however, was past, the natives having fled as soon as they saw their companions retire.

"I think it is all over now, Bob," the girl said. "In another quarter of an hour the sheds will all be down, and they will never dare to attack us without cover. They will have seen the men ride off, and will know that the settlers will be down on them before it gets dark. I will watch here; go and see what father is doing."

As soon as he reached the other loophole the boy saw that Mr. Suter was mounting; the colonist sat quiet in the saddle for a minute or two and then rode straight for the house.

"Run down to the door, Miss Jane," he cried; "your father is coming."

"Thank God!" the girl exclaimed as she ran down; "that shows that the blacks have gone. Hold your gun ready to fire, Bob; there may be some of them lurking about still." The door was unbolted, and as they heard the horse's hoofs approaching, they threw it open and went out.

A moment later Mr. Suter rode up. "All well?" he asked, as he threw himself off his horse.

"All well, father."

"Thank God, my child! You can guess what my feelings have been since I discovered the blacks were attacking our place. Well, Bob, so you have been lending a hand in the defence. Thank you, my boy; with all my heart I thank you." And after wringing Bob's hand he entered the door. "Hullo! what is this?" he asked in surprise.

"That is Johnson's horse, sir. I rode him here to warn you. The natives were close behind me, so I brought it into the house. I know Johnson values it very much, and I was afraid the blacks would catch it if I turned it loose."

"You did quite right, Bob; but you may as well get it out again now. I do not think there is any fear of the blacks returning."

Pushing past the horse, Mr. Suter ran upstairs to his wife, whom he found on her knees by the bed, thanking God for their deliverance and his safe return. In a short time he came downstairs again, and went out to Bob, who had taken his post a short way from the house, to make sure that none of the blacks were returning.

"Now tell me all about it, Bob. How was it you knew the blacks were coming here? My wife tells me that if it had not been for you giving the alarm in time for them to close the shutters, they must have been killed."

Bob told him how it had come about.

"I don't know, sir," he said, "what Johnson will say, but it did not seem to me that I could be any good alone there. It weren't as if he had only gone out for an hour or two. I could not have held them stables by myself, and I thought if I saved the horse he wouldn't mind the rest. Besides, when I saw the cattle running this way, I guessed the blacks would attack here first, and there was nothing to do but to try and get here before them."

"Well, my lad, you saved their lives, there is no doubt about that; and my wife has been telling me how bravely you took your share in the defence."

"Well, sir, they saved my life, and you was all

awful good to me. I should not have cared a bit if the blacks had killed me, so as Mrs. Suter and Miss Jane got off all right. I suppose the men went to get help, sir?"

"Yes; we shall have some of the settlers here before long. Then we will go after the blacks, not only to get Johnson's cattle back, but to give them a lesson to leave us alone."

"I wonder whether they burnt the place down," Bob said.

"It is quite possible they may not have done so. They would have seen my men ride off, and would know that it would not be long before we began to gather, and that we should be hotly pursuing, and I expect they made off as fast as they could after their failure here. They would know pretty well that there was not much worth taking at Johnson's, and might not care about losing time to break in there."

It was not long before the settlers began to ride up, each with two or three of his men armed with guns. When twenty had assembled they thought they were strong enough to start. Bob had only seen about fifty blacks; eight of these had fallen in their attack on the station, and probably several others had been wounded. There might, of course, have been others who had not joined in the pursuit of the cattle, but the settlers were ready to risk that—each considering himself a match for at least three of the blacks.

Bob took them to the place where the cattle had been overtaken at the edge of the wood. From this point there was no difficulty in following the trail. It soon diverged from that made by the cattle in their flight, bearing away to the left.

"It won't take us within half a mile of the house," Bob said. "I hope we shall find it all right, sir."

"I will ride with you there at once, Bob. If I find it all right, I can strike across and hit the trail again."

Taking four others with him, Mr. Suter rode with Bob to Johnson's. The boy gave a shout of satisfaction as they came in view of the station. They rode up to it and found it untouched.

"Now, Bob, will you stay here or go with us?"

"I will go with you, sir. There ain't no fear of the blacks coming back again, and as they have the boss's cattle, I should like to help drive them back."

They soon found the trail again, and after half-an-hour's hard riding came up to the main party.

"We shan't have very far to go before we overtake them," one of the men said. "The beasts were weak and out of condition, and that first stampede will have taken a lot out of them. They won't be able to go far."

In another hundred yards they came upon a dead ox. It had been speared and a portion of the meat cut off.

"I expect it dropped," one of the men said. "They cut off some meat to eat it raw as they ran."

A little farther they came upon a dead native. He had been carried so far on a rough litter of branches. Then more oxen, all of which had been speared.

"Come on, lads," Mr. Suter said, urging his horse forward; "the blood is flowing still. They can't be very far ahead. If we don't come up to them soon they will spear the whole lot."

Another five miles were ridden at the top speed of their horses. They were beyond the forest now, but the plain was covered in many places with high scrub.

"Look out, lads," one of the settlers said; "if they attack we must dismount. This is just their ground."

Two minutes later a volley of spears flew from the bushes on either side.

The men threw themselves from their horses and opened fire into the bush. Most of them had pistols as well as guns, and, keeping these in reserve, they fired their guns as quickly as they could load them.

"We had better get on again," one of the men said. "You may be sure they have fallen back a bit, and that while we are waiting here they will be driving the cattle on. Push on and overtake them, then find a good place for making a halt."

The advice was good, and they mounted and rode on again, and in another half-mile came upon the cattle.

As they rode up several natives dashed into the scrub. Twelve beasts were lying speared on the ground; the rest were huddled together with their heads down, in a state of extreme exhaustion. As the settlers leaped from their horses, one of them said—

"Now, gentlemen, we had better set to work to clear away some of this scrub. The cattle can't go any farther at present, and most of our horses have had enough of it. We must halt here for two or three hours before we turn back. Half of us had better stand sentry on one side, while the other half cut down the bush. This is the side to cut on."

"What difference does it make, Tom?"

"I expect it will make a good deal of difference, Harrison. The wind is from the other side. I am afraid you will see the difference in a few minutes. Out with your knives, men; every moment is of value."

Somewhat mystified, the others set to work,

knowing that the man who had spoken had a long experience with the natives, having for many years occupied a bush farm.

While working himself as hard as any one, he kept turning, looking back. Presently he exclaimed—

“I thought what the black cusses would be up to. Out with your match-boxes, lads, and fire the bush.”

“Fire it!”

“Ay, it is our only chance. I can smell smoke; they have fired the bush to windward. You men on the other side,” he shouted, “look after the cattle and horses; there is no fear of natives now; it is fire we have got to fight. Cover the horses’ heads up with blankets, and head off the cattle till we’ve made a clearance for them.”

The men understood their danger now; the dry grass growing at the edge of the scrub they had begun to cut away was fired at a dozen places. The flame ran along the herbage almost like a flash of powder; the bush, dried up by the long drought, caught like tinder, and a wall of flame shot up.

“That is right,” the settler said. “Stamp out the grass on this side; don’t let it come a foot nearer this way. As soon as it is safe, look to the animals.”

CHAPTER VII

It was fortunate the cattle were so exhausted that they were almost powerless to run. Many had already sunk down on their knees; the others stood with staring eyes and roughened coats glaring in terror at the wall of fire, backing into the bushes on the other side of the track. A few of the strongest

turned round and dashed headlong into it, but the shouts of the men kept the main body from following the example.

"Follow it up as close as you can," the settler said; "stamp out the embers; we shall have the other fire down on us in a few minutes;" and indeed the air was now pungent with smoke which drifted down on them from the other side.

The main body of the fire was by this time a hundred yards away; but the stumps were still blazing fiercely; the men, all of whom wore high riding-boots, were soon engaged in trampling these down, breaking them off with the barrels of their rifles. A dull roar like a rising wind could be heard behind them, burning leaves and ashes fell thickly round them, and the air was dark with smoke, the cattle stamping and bellowing, and even the most exhausted struggling to their feet again.

"Now, let them come," the old settler shouted; "little by little, don't let them get into a run. All form a line in front of them."

His orders were obeyed. The settlers formed a line in front of the cattle, and waving their arms and guns moved slowly backwards, the cattle following close upon them. Louder and louder rose the roar of the fire, mingled with sharp crackling noises. The smoke was almost unbearable. They were fifty yards away from the edge of the bush when the flame rushed up to it. It rose in the air like a wave striking a rock, and then almost as suddenly subsided; the foliage had gone, but a thousand stumps and branches burned and crackled fiercely. The fire they had themselves lighted was by this time a mile away. In another ten minutes the panic of the herd

had abated, though they still continued snorting and trampling on the heated ground.

"Keep them together a bit longer," the settler said; "they have trampled out the last embers under their feet, and it will be soon cool enough for them to lie down. A couple of you had best go and cut up one of those dead oxen; two or three others knock off some of those blazing stumps and make a fire; I reckon you are all pretty hungry, for we did not stop, any of us, to have a meal when we were summoned."

Just at present it was thirst more than hunger that the men felt; they were blackened by smoke and ashes, and parched by the heat and smoke; water-bottles were taken from the saddles, and a long drink indulged in. As soon as some of the cattle began to lie down again the men ceased to watch them; and now, for the first time, they were able to attend to the wounds that had been inflicted by the first volley of spears. Four of them had been struck, but happily none of the injuries were dangerous, and the men had pulled out the spears and had been able to go about their work. The wounds were now bandaged, the blankets taken off the horses' heads, and the troop then set about preparing their meal, secure that there was no chance of any further attack by the natives.

The party remained on the burnt plain for some hours, and at six o'clock in the afternoon started on their way back, the cattle being sufficiently recovered by their rest to continue their journey at a slow pace. The fire had extended far across the plain, and it was three miles before they reached its limits, the flames having been stopped at a spot clear of

scrub. The cattle as they went now plucked at the leaves and gradually quickened their pace. Once in the woods they seemed to know that relief was near at hand, and hurried along until in another hour they reached the water-hole, into which they rushed and plunged their muzzles deep in the fluid. Bob had at the halting-place counted the cattle, and found that there were seven-and-twenty missing, a hundred and fifty being saved.

"That is not so bad," one of the settlers said, "except that we haven't given the blacks as good a lesson as we had hoped; still, I don't think they are likely to interfere with us for some time, for they have made nothing by their raid, and I expect we killed some of them in the scrub, besides those that fell in the attack on your station, Suter. They have learnt, too, that we can muster a force in a very short time, and that there is no chance of their being able to get away with either sheep or cattle, while they are as weak as they are at present."

Mr. Suter had been speaking to Bob, and he now said to the settlers—

"Johnson's station is only half a mile from here. The boy says he will make some tea, so we may as well go on there and have a meal before we separate."

Bob soon had a fire lighted and a kettle hanging over it; he had a good stock of tea and flour, dampers were made, and the meat they had brought with them from the plain cooked. Bob brought out plenty of oats for the horses, and after a hearty meal the settlers mounted and rode off.

"Will you come home with me, Bob?" Mr. Suter asked.

"No, I will sleep here, sir, but will ride over in

the morning. I don't like to leave the place at night, though I know there ain't no fear of the blacks coming again."

The next morning Bob went over the first thing.

"Well, Bob," Mr. Suter said after the first greetings, "I consider you one of the family now, and I wish I could say, come and live with us at once, but I can't, lad."

"No, of course not, sir; I know you don't want any more hands at present."

"It isn't that, lad; in a short time we shan't want any hands at all. I am sorry to say we shall have to give up the farm."

"Give up the farm, sir!" Bob repeated in surprise.

"Yes, my lad, things have gone badly with us; I have lost over ten thousand of my sheep, and unless we get rain soon, I shall lose the rest of them. That is bad enough, but it is not quite the worst. A year ago I borrowed a couple of hundred pounds on mortgage to carry on, as sheep were low, and I did not want to sell; the man I borrowed of has got frightened, knowing how the sheep are dying off at all these up-country stations, and two days ago I received a notice from him calling in the money in a month's time, as he had the right to do by the terms of the mortgage. At the present moment sheep are worth nothing—nobody would take them as a gift—and the consequence is he must come in and take the farm."

"But what will you do, sir?" Bob asked in dismay.

"We have made up our minds, Bob, to go down to a town. I shall get what work I can, and my wife and daughter, who are both handy with their needle, will try and get employment as dressmakers

It seems a little hard, my boy, but we know that all things are for the best."

Bob burst into tears.

"Don't cry, lad; we shall do very well, I have no doubt. Should we doubt God just when He has saved my wife and daughter from a terrible death?"

But Bob was not to be comforted, and in a short time he mounted the horse and rode slowly back. When he approached the station he saw some figures near it, and rode quickly on; they were a party of police, an officer and six white men and two native trackers.

"Do you belong here, boy?" the officer asked as he dismounted.

"Yes, sir."

"I heard last night of the affair with the blacks, and have ridden over to learn all about it. They tell me you saved the people at the next station by riding over to warn them. Now tell me all about it."

Bob gave an account of the proceedings of the previous day.

"Well, you did very well, youngster. Where is Johnson?"

"He is away, sir. Gone away for a week or ten days."

"Is he often away?"

"Yes, sir, pretty often."

"I see he has locked up the house: does he always do that when he is away?"

"Yes, he always locks it up."

"Curious habit, that," the officer said. "Doesn't he leave the key with you?"

"No, sir, he gives me out tea and sugar, flour

and bacon, so there is no call for me to go into the house. I sleep over the stable."

"Always?"

"Yes, always."

The officer looked thoughtfully at Bob.

"There is nothing particular in the house to steal, I suppose?"

"No, sir, not as I knows on."

"You go in there at other times, I suppose?"

"Oh yes, sir; I cook and do the place up, except his bedroom; he does that himself."

The officer walked away and chatted for some time with his sergeant.

"You don't know where your master goes while he is away, do you?"

"No, sir; I don't know nothing about it."

"Is he often away as long as this?"

"I have been with him over a year, now; he has been away twice as long as this, but generally it is only for three or four days."

"He don't keep any other hands but you?"

"No, sir; he ain't no call for hands; he has only got that herd of cattle—about a hundred and eighty there were—they don't want much looking after; and then there is a tater ground that took me about a week to dig up and plant the taters in the spring, but there ain't nothing else to do but to look after the two horses and just do what cooking there is. It ain't a hard place for a boy like me, and a man would not have nothing to do. He didn't keep a hand at all when I came to him."

"Where did he pick you up, boy?"

"I was with dad and mother—dad was shepherding at Cookson's, but the blacks killed both of them

and as Cookson didn't want a boy, I came away with Johnson, who had been over to chase the blacks and bring back the sheep."

"Oh yes; I remember hearing about that. Did you say there were some bullocks killed by the natives?"

"Yes, sir; there was one about two miles from here, and a lot of them on farther."

"Which way is the bullock lying?"

Bob pointed in the direction.

"Best way of finding it, sir, would be to go straight across there until you come on the trail of the cattle; that is about half a mile away; if they follow that, they can't miss the bullock."

"Then I may as well get some meat," the officer said; and at his order two of the troopers mounted, and, with two black trackers, started through the wood. In less than an hour they returned laden with meat.

"You tell your master we took it," the officer said; "it was of no use letting it lie there; it wouldn't have been fit to eat in another day."

Another of the troopers had started, a few minutes after the first party, to ride to Mr. Suter's station, to buy flour and tea, while those who remained behind had got a great fire lighted, and as they had pannikins with lids that served as plates in their saddle-bags, they were able to do well. The officer asked Bob a few more questions, but the lad, without understanding why they were asked, answered cautiously, and gave as little information as possible, his habits in London having led him to mistrust a policeman in any shape. The police were accustomed to bivouac in the open air, and Bob was amused at seeing how readily they made themselves at home. He had, at the men's invitation, joined

them at their meal, the officer taking his a little apart. Bob had, when the meal was being prepared, groomed the horse he had ridden, and, having nothing to do, laid himself down on the ground by the fire, with his chin propped upon his hand, listening to the talk of the troopers.

It turned almost entirely upon blacks and bush-rangers. Of the latter Bob had heard but little, nothing indeed, since he arrived at Cookson's farm with his parents. From what the men said he gathered that there was a gang led by a desperate character, whom they spoke of as Black George, who had been committing depredations for a considerable time. Two or three of them had several times ridden into villages, and, pistol in hand, had gone from house to house, compelling every one to give up their valuables. Black George had walked into a bank, shot down the cashier and clerk, and ridden off with all the gold in the safe. Many stations had been plundered and a score of murders committed by these desperadoes. The police had several times been hard on their track, but had always missed them. Sometimes they would appear in one part of the colony, and sometimes in another. At times nothing would be heard of them for a month or two, then they would appear again, to commit half-a-dozen daring exploits. The general opinion was that there were but four of them, including the captain.

"It is a rum thing," one of the men said, "that the reward don't induce some one to peach."

"It may be there ain't any one in it but their four selves," another said. "They get everything they want at the places they go to; besides, one of them has only got to ride into a village, and buy

any stores they want. I expect they have a hut somewhere; perhaps beyond the settlements."

"Yes, that is right enough; but they must get news. Whenever we get sent in one direction, they are sure to be heard of in another; it can't be always accident. I expect they are in with some of these ticket-of-leave men—there are plenty of them scattered about—and hear from them what we are doing."

"Like enough; but those are just the fellows who would be tempted by the reward to peach on them."

"Yes, that is all well enough; but there is the risk to be considered. Two hundred pounds is pretty dearly earned when there is a pretty strong risk of being shot. If we caught the four of them it would be all right, but if one got away it would go pretty hard with the fellow who put us on the scent."

"Is the reward two hundred pounds?" Bob asked.

"That is it, young 'un; now, there is a good chance for you to get a start in life. You find out Black George, and come and tell us, and we will take him, and you will draw your two hundred pounds safe enough."

There was a laugh among the men. Bob did not join in it, but lay for some time gazing into the fire. Two hundred pounds! Just the sum that would save the Sutlers from being turned out of their farm. If he could but earn it!

"What is Black George like?" he asked presently, as the conversation continued to turn on the bush-rangers' exploits.

"He is a man of about forty; a dark, heavy-browed sort of chap; looks as if he would stick at nothing, and doesn't. He was out here for life for a burglary, in which two people were shot. They

couldn't prove that he was the man who did that, so he got the benefit of the doubt; he killed a warder and made off after he had been here six months."

"He is a savage brute," another said. "He shot down a man the other day because he didn't move quick enough in getting him a bottle of wine he had ordered. If we ever catch him, it will be because of his temper."

CHAPTER VIII

BOB asked no more questions; the description of the man answered exactly to that of the fellow who had threatened to shoot him. Of course, there were plenty of other men who were dark and savage-looking; still he was about the same age, and though Bob knew nothing about bushrangers, these visits from people who, as far as he knew, did not live anywhere near, had often caused him to wonder vaguely who they were, and to have a suspicion that all was not straightforward with them. The care with which he was always excluded from the hut when they were there had strengthened this idea, and it now seemed to him quite possible that they might be the men of whom the police were speaking. There were four of them altogether, though they had never come more than three, and more generally only two, at a time.

After it became dark he saw the captain and sergeant talking earnestly together, and cautiously crawled up behind them. The officer was saying—

"Well, sergeant, at any rate we must keep our eye on this fellow Johnson; it is evident there is something mysterious about him. He can't make

his living out of this knot of cattle, that is quite clear, and these absences of his are curious. He is evidently not one of the men we are after, for the description Onslow got from Suter of him doesn't at all answer to either of them; he is over forty, and except their captain, none of the others are more than seven or eight and twenty. Still, he may have something to do with them; the boy has no suspicion that there is anything wrong—I am certain of that by his face; but I don't think he told me all he knew. He saw that I was trying to pump him, and I suppose he thought the less said the sooner mended. However, we will make a note of it; it may be something and it may be nothing, but one of these days we will make it our business to watch this Mr. Johnson."

Bob crawled off again, and going up to his loft lay down on the hay. He had never thought of it before, but it was curious where Johnson got his money; he had sold twenty head of cattle three months before, but that was the only sale he had made since he had been with him, and he knew that the money he would have received for them could not have gone very far, for there was nothing except potatoes grown on the place, and everything in the way of food had to be paid for. There were always spirits on Johnson's table, and when the visitors came there were generally some empty wine bottles on the table next morning.

More and more he felt convinced, as he thought things over, that the visitors were the bushrangers; but if they were, how was he to make sure of it, and above all, how was he to put the police on their track? He could not bring them there, even if they were within reach when the visitors came, for if they

were the bushrangers, Johnson was evidently in alliance with them, and whatever came of it he could not betray Johnson. The man had not been unkind to him, rough sometimes, no doubt—others might have thought very rough—but Bob's life had been made up of roughnesses, and he had been so vastly happier with Johnson than at any previous time, that he felt really grateful towards him. The man might have been afraid that if he ill-treated him he would leave him, and that he might speak of the visitors at the hut, but whatever the motive, he had not been unkind; he had taught him to shoot and to ride, he had put him in the way of some day turning out a good stockman, and Bob felt that in no case could he betray him.

At daybreak next morning, the police mounted and rode off. Bob rode out to look after the cattle, and then wandered about the station. "I have got to hear what they say," he said to himself over and over again; the question was, how was he to do it? It was not till the evening that a plan occurred to him, and the next morning he rode off early to Mr. Suter's.

"So you had the police at your place the day before yesterday, Bob."

"Yes, sir; they went away yesterday morning."

"One of them came over here to get some flour and things."

"Yes, I know he did, sir."

"Is anything the matter, Bob? You are looking very serious this morning?"

"No, sir, there ain't anything the matter, only I came over to ask you if you would lend me a tool?"

"What sort of a tool, Bob?"

"I want a thing that will make a hole through a bit of timber, sir."

"You mean an auger, Bob."

"I daresay that is it, sir."

"I can lend you that, Bob; I have a very good tool-chest. What do you want to make a hole for?"

"It is something particklar, sir. I will tell you some day, but please don't ask me now."

"Very well, Bob," the settler said, smiling; "if there is anything mysterious about it, I won't ask you questions."

"Thanks, sir; it ain't no harm, but I would rather not tell you now."

"This is the sort of thing you want, I suppose," Mr. Suter said, taking an auger out of a tool-chest. "How large a hole do you want to make?"

"I want to make a good big hole, sir, but I suppose if I put three or four little 'uns together that will make a big hole?"

"Certainly it will, Bob, though not so smooth a one as if cut with a large auger. This is a medium-sized one; put a bit of fat on it when you use it, it will work all the easier. Won't you stop to breakfast?"

"No, thank you, sir. I have not been out to look at the cattle yet, so I must be getting back."

"When do you expect your master back?"

"In two or three days, sir, but it may be longer than that."

Bob rode back to the station. The house was built of rough logs with the bark on them: it had been built some five years before by a settler, who, having lost his wife after a residence there of two years, had lost heart and sold out to Johnson. As soon as he returned, Bob rode off first to see after

the cattle, then lit a fire and placed a kettle over it, and then went to the hut and selected the spot where he intended to operate. In one corner of the room inside stood a rough cupboard by the wall; it had, with the rest of the furniture of the place, belonged to the first owner. With a knife, Bob cut through the bark of one of the logs, making an incision some two inches square. He took the piece of bark that had come off and laid it carefully aside; then he set to work with the auger at one corner of the spot cleared of the bark, spreading a blanket on the ground to catch the sawdust as it fell. As the log was some fifteen inches in diameter, it took him some five minutes of hard work before the auger was through.

He made three more holes, one at each corner, and then went and cooked his breakfast. It took him another three hours and a half's work completing the lines of holes just touching each other, for he had not skill enough to make the holes perfectly parallel to each other, and when, after an hour's work, he thought he had finished the job, he found that, instead of the piece coming out as he expected, it was as firm as ever, and he had to begin again at the centre of the square, and to work round and round it, till piece by piece he got out strips of the wood, and by moving the auger about found that the hole, jagged and rough as it was inside, was large enough for his purpose. He threw himself down bathed with perspiration, and with his hands a mass of blisters and his shoulders and arms aching. Then he carried the blanket to his fire and shook the chips and sawdust into it. He then got a small pole, and with a hatchet cut off a length of four inches at one

end; he took this to the hole and shaped it till it would slide in and out easily, then, with a horse-shoe nail, he fastened the piece of bark on to the end of the plug and placed it in the hole.

He had been very careful in cutting the bark, following the natural lines and indentations, and when it was replaced in its position it required a close inspection to discover the mark of the knife. A little mud was rubbed into the cracks and on the head of the nail, and Bob had no fear whatever that his work would be discovered from the outside; that it was hidden inside he knew, as the auger, after passing through the log, had touched the back of the closet, and as this closet had never been moved as long as he had been in the house, there was but slight fear of discovery from within.

He got but little sleep that night, being kept awake by the smart of the blisters and the aching of his shoulders; he was just dropping off to sleep when he heard a pattering on the shingles above his head. He sat upright in a moment.

"It's rain," he exclaimed; "oh, if it would but rain hard, it might save the rest of the sheep."

Faster and faster came the drops, until the roar overhead was almost deafening. Jane Suter had taught him to pray, and he knelt up,—

"Good God, please to let it keep on raining; we do want rain so dreadful. Please let it keep on till the whole country is soaked and the water-holes are all full again. It will save the lives of the sheep, and save Mr. and Mrs. Suter and Jane, and many other people from being ruined altogether. Amen."

Then he lay down again, and in a few minutes was fast asleep. When he woke he lay for a minute

confused at the noise he heard, and then sprang up with a cry of pleasure; the rain was still coming down heavily. He looked out: there were pools of water in the yard, and a stream was running between the stables and the house. All day it continued without intermission, but as evening fell it gradually ceased, and before Bob lay down again, the stars were shining. As soon as it was light next morning, he rode out to look at the cattle; the water-hole was full to overflowing, the cattle had lost their heavy, languid appearance, and stood contentedly plucking the short grass or munching the leaves of the undergrowth; then he rode over to the Suters'.

On arriving he found that Mr. Suter and the men had all gone out to look after the sheep.

"This is a blessing indeed, Bob," Mrs. Suter said as he entered. "There is no fear of drought now for the rest of the season. Some of the low ground is completely flooded, and we may hope to save the rest of the sheep."

"Will you be able," Bob asked eagerly, "to stay here, Mrs. Suter?"

"No, Bob; that is too much to expect, but my husband hopes now that the sheep will sell for enough to pay off the debt, and then we shall, in time, get something for the farm—enough, anyhow, to enable us to move down to the town, and to take a little place and to make a fair start there. You see, it would be no use holding on the farm without stock. We should do better by taking an acre or two of land near a town, and raising vegetables for sale. We could not do that here; and as Mr. Suter could not afford to keep men, we should be more exposed than before to attacks by the blacks."

"I would come and work for nothing, ma'am, and we might raise a lot of potatoes here."

"Yes, Bob, but whom should we sell them to? We should have to send them down to the town, and the carriage would cost more than they would fetch. No, my boy, our plan is the best."

"Please give this auger to Mr. Suter," Bob said, producing it from under his cloak; "he lent it me to do a job at the station."

"Oh yes, he told us about it," Jane Suter said, laughing. "You would not tell him what it was."

Bob smiled, but made no answer, and a few minutes later rode home.

He went first on his return to look at the piece of bark, and found that he had some difficulty in finding the spot. It struck him that it would be well-nigh impossible to do so in the dark; he therefore got a stick, measured the length from the ground to the centre of the square piece of bark, and cut a notch in the stick. Then he measured from the corner of the house, and cut another notch, and afterwards carried the stick up to his loft.

That evening, Johnson returned; he had heard, on his way up, the account of the attack of the blacks at Suter's station, and of the carrying off and rescue of his own cattle. He did not seem put out as he rode up, for he said as he alighted and threw the reins to Bob, "So you have had some sharp work here, boy, while I have been away?"

"Yes, sir, the blacks have been here."

"Yes, I heard about it as I came up. They said that my place was not burnt, but I hardly expected to find it standing till I saw it. How many cattle did they get?"

"They killed twenty-seven, sir, the rest look first-rate after the rain."

"They didn't get my horse, did they?"

"No, sir, I rode off with that; they went close by here after the cattle, and I saw there were quite fifty of them, and thought it was no use of me trying to fight such a lot; and as I knew you thought a lot of your boss, the best thing was to take it to Suter's, so I rode it in there and took it into the house, and it was there safe while we were fighting the blacks."

"Well, take the other round to the stable, give him a good feed of oats, and then come and light the fire."

When Bob entered the house Johnson had lit the lamp. Bob glanced first at the corner by the cupboard, to see if any sawdust had fallen behind it, and his heart gave a bound of relief as he saw that the floor was perfectly clean. Then he lit the fire, and put some rashers of bacon over it. He had that afternoon fried some dampers, thinking that his master might return, and the kettle was boiling over his own fire outside.

"Now tell me all about it," Johnson said as he sat down to the meal.

Bob told the story.

"That was a close shave when they set fire to the bush," Johnson said. "I wish I had been here to have peppered some of those black scoundrels. Nothing else now, I suppose; no one been here?"

"Yes, sir, the day after the affair with the blacks a party of police came."

Johnson set down the mug of tea that he was raising to his lips. "The police!" he said. "What on earth did they want here?"

"They came to inquire about the attack by the blacks, I suppose, sir. They asked me all sorts of questions about them."

Johnson went on eating for a minute or two in silence, and then said—

"I suppose they were surprised at finding that I was away, and the place shut up?"

"They asked about you, sir, and I said you had gone down to Sydney. They seemed rather surprised that the place was shut up, but they didn't say much about it. They cut some meat off one of the bullocks the blacks had speared, and sent over a man for flour and tea to the Suters, and next morning they rode off before I was up."

"Did they ask any other questions?" Johnson said carelessly.

"No, sir, nothing particular. They asked about your stock, and how many cattle you had lost."

"Did they ask whether I knew many people round here, and whether I had visitors and that sort of thing?"

"No, sir, they didn't ask that, and I shouldn't have told them if they did. It wasn't their business who you knew."

"Quite right, Bob; those fellows are always prying about, as if every one was a rogue but themselves. Don't you answer any questions if they come here again. I don't suppose they will. Of course it was only the news of those confounded blacks that brought them into the neighbourhood. Still, one does not want one's affairs talked about; I know my business, and I suppose they know theirs. There, you can put the rum bottle on the table and turn in. I shan't be long myself; I have had a long ride."

Bob's heart gave a sudden thump of excitement when soon after dark on the following evening he heard horses ride up to the door of the house, and a voice he recognised as that of the man who had threatened him, shout Johnson's name. He ran out from the stable at once. Johnson had already opened the door.

"Take the horses round to the stable, Bob," he said, as the lad ran up.

"And mind you look after them properly, you young whelp," the other man added: "and don't you scamp your work as you did last time, or I shall make it hot for you."

Bob took the horses, and led them into the stable, took off the saddles, put some oats before them, and began to rub them down vigorously; he guessed that for a time those within the house would be cooking and eating, and that until that was done, and the drink on the table, they would not be talking much. After an hour's hard work he had the two horses finished, then putting out the lamp, and leaving the door ajar so that he could slip back hastily if necessary, he stole out. He thought, however, that there was but little fear of their coming out to look after him; they had never done so on any previous occasion. Having first put a brace of pistols in his belt, for he knew well enough that if detected the men would not hesitate to shoot him, he left his boots behind him, and crept noiselessly up to the back of the house, measured with the stick to the spot, found the piece of bark move under his finger, and quietly drew out the plug; then he put his ear to the hole.

CHAPTER IX

THEY were talking loudly within, for the shutters were up, and they had no fear of being overheard.

"Well, you made a good job of it, Johnson; at least, as good as we could expect. That scoundrel Tindall makes a big harvest out of us, but it can't be helped; anyhow, there is no fear of his peaching. And you paid it into the bank all right?"

"All right; there is the bank book to show for it."

"That is right; paid in, in cash, three hundred and fifty pounds; that makes the total of five thousand eight hundred to the account of Mr. James Macdermott," and the three men laughed heartily.

"He broke the swag up, I suppose, as he promised?" one of the men asked.

"Yes, I saw him do it; he got the stones out of the rings and trinkets, and melted the gold up with all the watch-cases, so that there is no fear of there being any row about them; he said he should send off the notes by the next mail home, and they would get passed through Holland."

"Oh, he is a cute chap, Tindall is," another put in; "as cute as they make them; he gets a big pull out of us, but he is straight."

For some time they talked of what they had been doing since they met last, and although Bob did not know the names mentioned, he learned enough to tell him that the men, if not those for whom the reward was offered, were certainly bush-rangers, and had lately been engaged in some desperate undertaking.

"And what is the next job?" Johnson asked presently.

"We mean to crack the bank at Eversham; it is Thursday, to-day, and we shall try on Saturday night; there is always a lot of money paid in on Saturday. We shall ride sixty miles to-morrow, change horses at the place you know, and ride in the other twenty after dark; the other two are to meet us there. The manager and the clerk sleep in the bank."

"How are you going to get in?"

"We shall smash the lock with a pistol shot, and take a couple of heavy axes to chop down the door, if there are bolts; then Bill and I will go in and settle the two men, and get the swag, while the other two will ride up and down the place, and shoot at any one who puts his head out of his door."

"It is a biggish place," Johnson said doubtfully.

"Oh, that is no odds. When people hear pistols going in the street, they are in no hurry to turn out of their beds. That infernal Escott and his police are out of the way; they have been up here since those blacks made their raid."

"Yes, they came here," Johnson said, "the day after it. Where are they now?"

"They are at Cookson's; that is why I am rather in a hurry about this job; they may take it in their heads to go back any day. And as we haven't been near Eversham for some time, they may get the notion into their thick heads that we may try that neighbourhood next."

"Who did the police see when they were here?"

"Only the boy; of course I was away."

"You have been a fool, Johnson, to have that boy

about. I can't think what you wanted him for. The best thing you could do, would be to put a bullet into his head, or I will do it for you, if you are nice about it."

"There is no harm about the boy," Johnson said angrily; "it is all very well for you fellows who are always about and doing something, but I can tell you it is mighty dull up here for me, all by myself; I should not mind so much, if it wasn't for the gold hidden away. But you know what those black trackers are; I believe they could smell out a secret hiding-place like a dog. It was rare lucky that I locked the place up before I went away."

"Why, that was just the thing to excite suspicion, you fool! Why, the police might go in and out of this rotten old hut a hundred times and never suspect anything; but when they find you lock it up, they naturally wonder what you did it for, and when those blacks begin to wonder, they never stop till they find out. If you are afraid, the best thing you can do would be to tie the gold up in a leather bag, and either bury it in the wood, or chuck it into that water-hole of yours. But whatever you do, don't lock up the place when you go out. Why, even that boy of yours must suspect there is something up; he looks as sharp as a gimlet. Those London street boys always do."

"He is all right," Johnson grumbled; "he thinks I lock up to prevent any prowling blacks there might be about, meddling with things."

"I would not trust him as far as I can see him," the man said. "I wonder what he is up to now; trying to listen to us, like enough?"

"How can he listen?" Johnson said. "Why,

you couldn't hear through the windows alone, much less with the shutters up."

"Well, I will go and make sure," the man said.

"I will go myself," Johnson said firmly. "I know what you are, and I am not going to have the boy hurt. Putting everything else aside, he is friendly with the people at the next station, and if he were missing, they would kick up a row about it, and like enough set the police at work to trace him."

Bob had heard enough; he slipped the plug into its place, ran across to the stables, closed the door gently behind him, and climbed up into the loft. A minute later, he heard the door below open, and Johnson's voice called out, "Are you there, Bob?"

"Yes, I am here, sir; do you want anything?"

"No, it's no matter now, as you have turned in; never mind."

Bob lay for some time thinking it would be easy enough to go off now, get to Cookson's and bring the police back before daybreak; but to do that, would be to bring ruin on Johnson, and that was not to be thought of. He must wait until the next night; there would still be time for the police to get to Eversham before the attempt on the bank would be made. He was up before daylight and at work on the bushrangers' horses.

An hour later he heard Johnson shout "Saddle up!" and a few minutes later he led the two animals to the door.

The bushranger looked at them closely; there was no excuse for grumbling, and without a word he swung himself into the saddle.

His companion tossed a shilling to Bob, and then they rode off together.

Bob got breakfast, and then catching his own pony, which had escaped the raid of the blacks, rode out to the cattle.

Soon after he returned, Johnson said—

“I shall go and have a look at the cattle myself; you can get dinner ready by the time I come back.”

“Shall I saddle your horse, sir?”

“No, I have had enough riding lately; I will walk.”

Bob noticed as he went off that he held his hands so as to support the pockets of his jacket, and guessed that he was going to take the advice given him the night before, and throw the bags into the water-hole.

Bob himself, instead of turning his pony loose, had tethered it a quarter of a mile away. As a matter of curiosity, he went and felt the door when Johnson was away; it was still locked.

“He hasn’t taken it all,” he said to himself; “or else there is something else he is afraid one might see.”

Johnson returned to dinner, after which he again went out.

To Bob the day went very slowly. The police were at Cookson’s the day before; but might they still be there to-night? If not, everything depended on the way they went; if they moved down the country he might find them, and get them to Eversham in time; if they had moved along the back settlements this would be impossible, and the only thing would be to ride to Eversham and tell the manager at the bank what was intended; but in that case he might not be believed, or the manager might take such steps that the news would get about the place, and the bushrangers be warned in time. There was another matter that worried him—would Johnson, when he missed him in the morning,

guess the errand on which he had gone, and ride to warn the bushrangers?

It was eighty miles, but he might do it in time. They would not attack, in all probability, till the town was asleep, although there was no certainty of this; for, as he had heard from the police, so great was the terror they inspired, that they several times held up whole settlements in broad daylight.

Still, he thought and hoped that Johnson would not suspect the cause of his absence. He often went out to look after the cattle the first thing, for Johnson seldom turned out till between nine and ten; he would be surprised if he did not see him when he looked out, and by ten o'clock would be in a towering passion; then he might begin to suspect that something had happened to him, perhaps that he had been speared by the blacks. He would probably get his own breakfast, and then ride out to look for him; he might, when he could find no trace of him, go over to the Suters' to inquire if they had seen anything of him; if he did all that, he could hardly get to Eversham in time.

There was certainly no reason why he should suspect him. He could not think that he had heard the conversation that had taken place, and had satisfied himself that at the time he was in his bed in the loft. The more Bob thought it over, the more he felt that the chances of Johnson warning the bushrangers were slight indeed.

At ten o'clock he felt sure that his master was in bed, and, leaving the stable quietly, he made off to the spot where the young pony was tethered, carrying his saddle on his shoulders. He was soon mounted and on his way towards Cookson's. He

had never been there from the day he left the settler's service, but he knew the exact direction, and though he wandered a bit from the straight line, he arrived there before midnight.

He was saluted by a furious barking of dogs, and then a man came out from one of the sheds, and shouted, "Who is there?"

"Are the police here?" he asked in reply.

"Yes; what do you want?"

"I want to see the officer, Mr. Escott. I have something particular to tell him."

"Let us see who you are," the man said, and Bob rode up to him. The moon was up, and Bob, as he approached, saw that it was the sergeant.

"I am the boy you saw over at Johnson's last week, sergeant."

"Oh, I remember you now. You want to see Mr. Escott. Won't to-morrow morning do?"

"No, I want to see him at once, please."

"Very well, I will call him."

In three minutes the officer came out of the door of the house.

"You want to see me, boy?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, come in here, then." He led him into the sitting-room, where a candle had been already lighted. "Now, what is it? I hope you haven't called me up for nothing, for I have had a long day on horseback."

"No, sir; I think you won't mind when I tell you. There is a reward of two hundred pounds for the capture of Black George, isn't there, sir?"

"Yes, boy," the officer said eagerly. "Can you put us on his track?"

"I think so, sir. At any rate, I can put you on the track of four bushrangers."

"That is the number of his gang," the officer said.

"I don't know that one of them is Black George, sir; but he is a black-looking chap. I have heard him called Slater."

"That is his name," the officer exclaimed. "And how do you know about him?"

"I can't tell you that, sir. I hope you won't ask me, because I won't tell it—not if he gets off altogether. But if you will promise you won't ask questions about how I know, and promise I shall have the reward if you catch him, I can tell you where you can put your hand on him and the others to-morrow afternoon."

"Well, I will give you my word not to ask any questions, if you can do that, and you need have no fear about the reward."

"Very well, sir; then he is going to attack the bank at Eversham to-morrow night. He and one of the others are going to break in and shoot the manager and his clerk and take the money, while the other two are to ride about and fire pistols, and see that no one comes to interfere with them."

"At about what time will they be there?"

"I don't know, sir, except that it will be after dark. They said something about people not getting out of bed to interfere, so I suppose it won't be till ten o'clock."

"Will they be waiting in the town?"

"No, I don't think so, sir. Two men are to meet the other two at some place or other they know of, four or five miles out, and they are to ride in after dark. That is what Slater said."

"Then we will have them," the officer said, in a tone of deep gratification. "I have been hunting those fellows for the last nine months; the scoundrels have been a curse to the colony. Let me see. It is eighty miles there, and we can't ride direct to the place. Do they know we are here, boy?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then very likely one of them is watching the road." He thought for a minute. "Yes, it will be a good hundred going by the other road, and then working round. We had better be off at once." He opened the door. "Sergeant!"

"Yes, sir."

"Get the men up; we must start at once. I have got news of importance."

"Very well, sir."

Just at this moment Cookson came downstairs.

"Is anything the matter, Mr. Escott?"

"Yes, I have got news that puts me on the track of a man I have been looking after for some time. I have a long way to go, and it is unfortunate that four of the horses had such heavy work yesterday."

"Is it important?"

"It is, indeed. I will tell you, but keep it to yourself. Some of these ticket-of-leave men on the place may be in league with the fellows, and may warn them if it gets known in the station. I have news where I can lay my hand on that notorious scoundrel, Black George, and his gang."

"By Jove, that is news!" the settler said. "You will earn the thanks of the whole colony if you rid us of him; the fellow has been a perfect scourge. I always sleep with a couple of double-barrelled guns handy, in readiness for him. I will tell you what I

will do; you can have four of my horses, and leave yours here till you come this way again."

"Thank you; that will be a great service."

Bob had followed the sergeant out, and stood looking on while the horses were brought out and saddled. When the officer came out, he went up to him. "Am I to go with you, sir?"

"Just as you like, boy. What do you think yourself?"

"I would rather go, if you don't mind. You may not catch them all, and if one got away and guessed I had to do with it——"

"Yes, I see, my boy. Certainly, you had better come with us; is your horse fresh?"

"Yes, sir; he has done nothing to speak of for the last few days, and I am not very heavy. He will carry me, I have no doubt; and if he won't, you can leave me behind."

CHAPTER X

FIVE minutes later they were on the road. It was already dark when the party entered Eversham; they had halted for some hours in the middle of the day, and had borrowed fresh horses; indeed, the officer did not wish to arrive till after dark. The party had broken up; the officer with two of his men and Bob, leaving their horses behind them at a short distance from Eversham; came in on foot, as they were less likely to be noticed than if they had ridden up. The other troopers and the sergeant were to wait for another two hours before they entered, also on foot. Two were to hide them-

selves near the bank and to close up when the bushrangers had entered, so as to cut off their retreat, while the sergeant with the remainder were to post themselves so as to shoot down the other two men.

The officer had discussed with the sergeant whether it would not be better to bring three or four of the horses into the town so as to pursue, should any of the bushrangers escape their fire, but they had agreed that it would not be worth while to run the risk of being observed by bringing their horses in, especially as these would have no chance whatever of overtaking the comparatively fresh animals of the bushrangers. When they got near the bank the officer went on alone. Five minutes later he reappeared and gave a low whistle. The others walked up quickly and entered the open door, which was at once closed behind them. Mr. Escott had, before giving the signal, assured himself that there was no one standing near.

"Give an eye to the man and his wife in the kitchen," he said to one of the police. "I have not the least reason for suspecting them, but one can't be too careful. See that neither of them slips out."

The couple who looked after the house, finding that their unexpected visitors had had some food only an hour or two before, made tea, the men declining the offer of stronger liquor. They were naturally curious as to the reason of this visit of the officer and his men, but they asked no questions. At nine o'clock the manager came downstairs.

"Barnes, your wife had better go up to bed; we expect to have some trouble here shortly. You may as well load your pistols and have them in readiness. Mr. Escott's party is quite strong enough,

still you may as well be in readiness to lend a hand if necessary. Put out all the lights as soon as Mr. Escott has posted his men. I shall leave mine burning upstairs for another half-hour."

As soon as the woman had gone upstairs Mr. Escott came down. "Now, lads," he said, "I expect these fellows will break in at the front door. We will arrange to let them get well into the house before we show ourselves. Condon, you will go upstairs with Mr. Denny. Directly they get in they are likely to run up to overpower him and Mr. Willcox. You, Ames, with Mr. Denny's man, will remain down here with me; we will be in the office to the right of the passage with the door ajar, and will rush out directly they begin to go up, and so get them between two fires. Of course, if they happen to turn into the room where we are first, the party from upstairs will run down. Boy, you had better go upstairs and get out of the way altogether. We shall put a lamp burning on the table in the hall, then the party upstairs will be hidden and the bushrangers will be in full light. As we believe there will be only two of them, and we are six, we shall make short work of them if they show fight. I would rather take them prisoners than shoot them, but with such desperadoes as they are, they are not likely to give up without a fight. All of you look to the priming of your pistols."

"Is there nothing I can do?" Bob asked.

"Yes; directly you hear them breaking in, light the candles in the three rooms upstairs and then close the doors. If they should make a rush upstairs, throw the doors open so as to light the

landing, otherwise we may be shooting each other in the dark."

Before ten o'clock the light in the manager's room was extinguished, and the upstairs party went into his bedroom at the back of the house and sat there till, just before twelve o'clock, they heard sounds of two horses coming down the street. They at once hurried out to their posts at the top of the stairs. Bob closed the door behind him, and then going into the other two rooms, lighted candles there and then came out, closed the doors behind him, and took his post at one of them. Before he had finished there was the crack of a pistol as one of the bushrangers fired into the keyhole of the door, showing that they adhered to their original plan. A moment later came the thundering sound of two heavy axes plied rapidly. As arranged, Mr. Denny went to a window above, threw it up, and shouted, "What does this mean?" and then, as no reply was given, called out "Thieves!" at the top of his voice. The men outside took no notice of the calls, but plied their axes so vigorously that in less than a minute the door was in splinters, and, throwing themselves against it, it gave way, and they burst into the house. Mr. Denny had rejoined the other two men at the top of the stairs.

"Come on," Black George exclaimed to his companion, "let us finish with these fellows upstairs first."

They ran upstairs, but before they were half-way up, there was a shout below.

"Surrender! You are trapped, Black George. You are between two fires, and you will be shot down without mercy if you resist."

Black George looked round, and as he saw the uniforms of the police, he uttered a deep oath, threw up his hands and fired, the officer's pistol cracking at the same moment.

"Come on!" he exclaimed, and rushed up the stairs. Three pistols rang out, he and his companion both fired, and in a moment a hand-to-hand struggle was taking place at the top of the stairs.

Black George shot the constable and made a dash at one of the doors. Bob sprang forward and leaped on his back.

"Shoot him," the ruffian shouted. His companion had fallen to a pistol shot from Mr. Denny, but, raising himself on his elbow, he fired.

Bob felt a sharp pang and knew nothing more. When he came to himself he was lying on a bed, and Mr. Denny and the officer were standing beside him. His first feeling was one of surprise at finding that it was broad daylight.

"Did he get away?" he asked, in a voice no louder than a whisper.

"No, my boy. I shot him just as he was opening the window; it is thanks to you that he did not escape. Just that moment's delay made all the difference; another instant and he would have been out. The fellow with him was killed too, and one of those in the town. The other was hard hit; he nearly fell from his horse; he got off for the time, but a party started an hour ago in pursuit, and I expect they will get him; anyhow, the gang is broken up. Now, don't talk; the doctor is going to find the course of the bullet if he can."

"Where do you feel most pain, my boy?" the doctor asked.

Bob placed his hand just below his ribs in front. The surgeon opened his clothes; there was a lump just under the skin. "Here it is," he said to Mr. Escott; "is it worth while cutting it out? I am afraid there is no chance for him, poor fellow; the bullet has gone right through him."

"I should think you had better take it out," the officer said. "It may not make any difference, but it may cheer him up to know that it is out."

"I am going to cut the bullet out," the surgeon said cheerfully to Bob; "it will hurt you a bit, but you will feel more comfortable afterwards."

"All right, governor," Bob said in a faint voice. "I expect I am done for, but it don't make no odds."

The bullet was extracted, and then the wound having been dressed, he was left to himself. The constable Condon was dead; he had, indeed, received a wound that would probably have been fatal, from the shots the men had fired at random as they rushed upstairs, but a second shot had killed him instantaneously. The clerk had received a ball which had broken his shoulder, and Mr. Denny's cheek had been laid open by another bullet. His man had been killed by the first shot fired by Black George, which had passed within an inch or two of Mr. Escott's head, and had struck the man, who was standing just behind him.

In the afternoon Mr. Escott, with the manager, came in to see Bob, with whom the doctor was sitting. The doctor shook his head as they came in.

"I am afraid he is sinking," he said in a whisper as he rose.

Mr. Escott took the seat.

"I am very bad, ain't I?" Bob asked.

"I am afraid so, my boy."

"Shall I get the reward, Mr. Escott? I shan't die happy if I don't get the reward."

"Yes, my boy, you are certainly entitled to it."

"If I die shall I get it? I mean, can I give it to who I like?"

"Yes, my boy, it shall be paid to whomever you direct."

"I wish I could have had it before I died," Bob said. "I should like to send it myself."

Mr. Denny touched the officer, and they spoke for a minute or two together. The former left the room, and returned in a minute with a roll of notes.

"Here are the two hundred pounds, lad; I will advance it at once. Mr. Escott will see that it is repaid to me."

Bob's face lit up.

"Thank you, sir. Now, would you put it in an envelope and write a few words for me?"

Mr. Denny fetched writing materials.

"What am I to say, lad?"

Bob thought a minute, and then feebly dictated: "Dear Miss Jane, I had been thinking how I could get two hundred pounds, so that your father could pay the money, and that you all could go on living at the farm. I got to know about the bushrangers, and they have been caught, and I got the reward, and I send it to you with my love. I got hit, and am going to die, but don't you mind about that. It don't matter along with me, and it is all the better, because perhaps you would not have liked to have taken the money if I had been alive. I have thought a lot about God since you told me about Him, and have said the prayers you told me

regular. And as He looked out after me when I got hurt, and did not know nothing about Him, I expect He is sure to take care of me now. So no more. Give my love and respects to your father and mother.' Then put my name, Bob. Then, on the outside of the envelope, put 'Miss Jane Suter.' It's the station next to Johnson's. You will send it off soon, won't you?" he said to the officer.

"I will send it off at once, my boy; a man shall start with it in five minutes," the officer said, much affected. Hitherto he had looked rather coldly on the boy, for even police-officers, although they may benefit by information given for reward, are apt to have a contempt for those who betray others. But the discovery that Bob had not thought of himself in the matter entirely altered the case.

After exchanging a word or two with the doctor, he wrote a line himself, saying that the boy was dying, and probably would not live through the night. A mounted policeman started a few minutes later with the letter.

But, contrary to the expectation of the doctor, Bob did not die. For three days he lay between life and death, and then slowly rallied. The first feeble words he said were—

"Don't you let out I am not dead."

"What do you mean, my boy?" Mr. Denny asked.

"Don't you let Mr. Suter know I am not dead. If you do, he will be a-sending that money back."

"I will try and keep your secret, Bob. I had a letter from Mr. Suter this morning. Mr. Escott sent a line with your letter, saying that the doctor said you would not live through the night, so, of course, Mr. Suter writes believing that you are dead.

He speaks in the highest terms of you, and says that the news has caused great grief to him and his family. He has asked me to see that a stone is placed over your grave, and to send him the account."

Bob was silent for a minute or two, and then he said, "You write and say you will see to it, and say how much it will cost, and they will send you the money. You need not say as I am dead; you know they will suppose that; and if any time I die, you can see to the stone. I would not have them know I was alive for anything. It can't do no harm, you know, to let them think I am dead."

It was six weeks before Bob was up and about. The first day he was downstairs Mr. Escott happened to come to Eversham again.

Mr. Denny told him about the letter he had written for Bob, and he agreed that it would be as well to gratify the boy by allowing the Suters to remain in the belief that he died.

"The rains have saved all the sheep," he said, "and in course of time Suter will, no doubt, get straight again, and then he can discharge his debt to the boy without hurting himself. He is a fine little fellow, and we must see what can be done for him. You have got your cheque from the Government all right?"

"Oh yes; I had it a month ago."

Mr. Escott then went in to see Bob.

"What are you thinking of doing, Bob?" he asked, after they had talked together for some little time.

"I shall get a place in a farm about here, sir. You see, I can't go back to Johnson's, because the Suters would know I was alive directly."

"You can never go back to Johnson's, my lad; the man is dead."

"Dead, sir?"

"Yes, my boy, the man who escaped from here evidently thought that Johnson had betrayed them. The sergeant with the party that pursued him, followed him straight back to the station. When they got there, they saw his horse standing by the house; and when they rode up, there was Johnson lying by the door shot through the head. They went inside, and there in a chair was the man they were in search of, dead too. I told you he had been sharply hit, and it is a marvel how he managed to sit his horse until he got to the end of his journey. Evidently, when the door was opened, he shot Johnson dead, then he managed to dismount, and made his way into the house and there died."

CHAPTER XI

BOB sat without speaking for two or three minutes; he was sorry at Johnson's death, and felt, to a certain extent, that he had been the cause of it. Presently he said, "I can tell you now what I could not tell you before, sir. I overheard the talk of Black George and the others at the station, only I did not want to get Johnson into a row."

"That is what I supposed, my boy."

"Well, sir, there is another thing I heard; that is, that the bushrangers had paid their money into the bank at Sydney. Johnson had done it for them, and that is what he went down for. The money is in the name of James Macdermott—five thousand

eight hundred pounds there are—I don't know who it belongs to now."

"That is good," the officer said. "We have searched Johnson's hut all over, but could find nothing. I guessed he had acted as their banker. Government will get it. I shall draw up a statement of what you tell me, and they will claim it from the bank, and the bank will give it up on their guaranteeing them against other claimants. You will get a reward out of that, Bob—I can't say how much—but I should say five per cent. at the least, perhaps ten per cent."

"How much will that come to, sir?"

"Five per cent. would be two hundred and ninety pounds; ten per cent. would be double that."

Bob thought for some time.

"Who will Johnson's station go to?"

"No one at present. At the end of six months, if no one claims it, it will revert to the colony again."

"I should like to buy it, Mr. Escott. I never mentioned any other name to the Suters, so they would not know that it was me; but I should like to have it so as to go back and be next to them some day."

"Very well, I will see about it for you, Bob. There is a man who has been put in there to look after the place and the cattle."

Two months later Bob received a letter from Mr. Escott saying that Government had granted him ten per cent. on the money recovered, and the remainder had been divided among the people who had lost property at the hands of the bushrangers, and that, as it was certain that no one would claim Johnson's holding, it and the cattle upon it had been sold to him for three hundred pounds.

"I will see that a steady man is put in charge of the place; if he is paid a small sum a week, and half the increase of the cattle, he will do very well, with what he can make out of the place besides."

Bob had no difficulty in obtaining a situation, and remained there until he was one-and-twenty. He obtained news occasionally of the Suters, and learned that they were doing well, and that Jane had married a settler whose holding adjoined theirs on the other side. He had in the interval worked hard to obtain some sort of education, attending a night school at Eversham during the winter months. He heard occasionally from Mr. Escott, who had received the rank of captain very shortly after the break-up of Black George's gang, and learned that things were going on well at his station, and that there were now seven hundred cattle there, of which four hundred were his.

Being assured that even if Mr. Suter insisted on paying back the two hundred pounds, he could do so without inconvenience, Bob gave up his situation, purchased a horse, and rode up the country. He had already written to the man in charge saying that he was coming, and had arranged with him to stay on, at any rate, for a time. As he rode up, he would scarcely have known the old place. A large garden, well stocked with vegetables, surrounded the house, a rustic porch had been built in front of the door, there were blinds and white curtains at the windows, and the place looked home-like and prosperous. A man met him at the door.

"You are the boss, I suppose?"

"Well," Bob said laughing, "I have never thought of myself as boss, but I am Robert East."

"I am glad to see you," the man said; "it is a pretty lonesome station this, and the missus and I will be glad of company."

"I did not know that you were a married man, White," Bob said.

"Lor', yes; I should never have lived out here all by myself all this time."

A pleasant, middle-aged woman now came to the door. She, as well as her husband, was evidently surprised at Bob's youth.

"Why, sir, I expected to see some one ten years older than you, at least; Captain Escott said that the owner was engaged in other matters, and that we should, for some years, have entire charge, but you must have been quite a boy at that time."

"I was quite a boy, Mrs. White. I am only one-and-twenty now. As it was six years ago when you came here, you may guess what my age was. Fortunately I had some money, and, on the advice of Captain Escott, invested it here. I used to know it, but I see you have improved it wonderfully since I saw it last."

"Yes, it was a poor-looking place when we came," the man said, "but the beasts didn't take up much time for the first two or three years, so I broke up the ground for a garden at once."

Bob would scarcely have known the sitting-room; the walls had been papered, and several new articles of furniture added, and these and the muslin curtains completely altered its appearance.

The next morning he rode out with the man to look at the herd.

"We have got as many as the place will hold now," the man said; "I only sold off the bulls we did not want. Of course, you had the accounts? I

sent them in every year to Captain Escott, as he told me. Besides paying me my money there are two hundred and twenty pounds in the bank now, which I reckon is our joint account. We have taken this year to making cheese and butter. My wife was accustomed to a dairy in the old country, and I reckon we shall do well with it. There is a bit of land two miles square lying beyond ours for sale; two young chaps from England have been farming there, but they got tired of it, and they would sell it off with the stock and horses as it stands for a thousand pounds; it is dirt cheap at that."

"I will go over and have a look at it in a day or two," Bob said; "perhaps I may buy it."

After examining the herd, which were in excellent condition, and going round the place, which the man had entirely fenced in, Bob returned to dinner, and in the afternoon rode over to the Suters'.

Mr. Suter came to the door as he rode up.

"I am your next neighbour, Mr. Suter. East is my name."

"Come in, Mr. East; I heard from White the other day that he expected you. Hitch your horse up there; we are glad to have another neighbour."

Bob followed him into the house.

"My dear, this is Mr. East, who has just come to take possession of his place. This is my wife, and this is my daughter, Mrs. Alison; her husband's place lies next to ours on the other side."

"I suppose you are the son of our neighbour?" Mrs. Suter said.

"No, Mrs. Suter, I am the boss. My father died some years ago. Are things looking well in this part of the country, Mr. Suter?"

"Could not be better," the settler said. "Since that drought, more than six years ago, which nearly ruined us all, we have been most fortunate. I was nearly sold up then, but, thanks to God and to a dear friend, we got through it. Now I am a well-to-do man."

"A friend came to your assistance, eh, Mr. Suter?"

"Yes, it was a strange business. A lad to whom my wife and daughter had shown some little kindness, knew that we were in difficulties, and in order to save us, put the police on the track of four notorious bushrangers in order to get the reward of two hundred pounds offered for them. He succeeded, poor fellow, but at the cost of his life, and sent us the money that cleared off a pressing debt, which I was unable to meet, an hour or two before he died."

"Did he die here?"

"No; he died at Eversham. We never had even the opportunity of thanking him."

"I suppose you are quite sure he died?"

"Of course," Mr. Suter replied.

Jane Alison rose from her seat. Hitherto she had not spoken, but had been gazing intently at Bob.

"Father! Mother!" she said, "it is Bob himself, come back to us from the dead. Bob, is it you?"

"It is indeed, Miss Jane," he said, smiling, holding out his hand; but the young woman sprang forward, threw her arms round his neck, and kissed him.

It was some minutes before they were calm enough to ask questions.

"How was it they told us you were dead?"

"I don't think they ever told you so, Mr. Suter. They told you I was not expected to live through the night, and I was not expected to do so. But almost by a miracle I lived through it."

"But they told us that you had been buried!"

"No, sir, I don't think they told you that. Mr. Denny answered your letter, and said that he would see a stone placed on my grave, and he is going to if he outlives me. I am afraid it was rather a fraud, but he yielded to my entreaties."

"But why, Bob, why have you let us grieve for you as dead so long?"

"I know, father," Jane said; "it was because he knew that you would not take his money if you had dreamt that he was alive."

"That was it," Bob said. "It has been very hard for me not to see you again all this time; but I saw that it was the only way."

"Well, Bob, your gift has borne good fruit. I have fifteen thousand sheep and seven or eight hundred cattle, and I have over a thousand pounds in the bank. You must come into partnership with me, mustn't he, wife? We shall regard you as our son now."

"Thank you, sir, very heartily, but I have no occasion for it. I am the owner of Johnson's place. I was able to put them on the track to lay hands on the bushrangers' money at the bank, and I got ten per cent. on that in addition to the two hundred pounds, and Captain Escott arranged for the purchase of Johnson's place for me. I have been learning the business since. The farm is a thriving place now, and there is ample to live upon. It has been the great pleasure of my life to help you, sir, in return for all the kindness you showed me, and I hope you won't destroy that pleasure by insisting on my taking the money back. If ever things go wrong and I want it, I will come to you; but I

have, I think, a considerable store without that. I know the place where some of the bushrangers' money was hid; if you will go with me to-morrow morning I will get it. I believe it is in our old water-hole; that is not used now, for White has dammed the stream up higher and made a much better place, and the old hole is nearly empty."

"Of course you will stop here to-night, Bob?"

"Yes, sir; I told White you were an old friend of mine, and that very likely you would ask me to stop."

A man was at once despatched to Mr. Alison's place. An hour later the settler came over, and, with his wife, spent the evening at Mr. Suter's.

The next morning Bob and Mr. Suter, taking spades with them, rode straight to the old water-hole, cut the dam to enable the rest of the water to drain off, and after an hour's digging in the mud at the bottom found four leathern bags, which proved to contain eighteen hundred pounds in gold. Eight hundred of this Bob sent down to one of the institutions for the assistance of newly-arrived emigrants in Sydney. With the other thousand he bought the farm adjoining his own, and became a very prosperous man. White and his wife remained with him until, four years later, he married a daughter of Mr. Cookson, when they took four hundred cattle, their proportion of those upon the first farm, and established themselves upon new ground seven or eight miles away. A good house replaced the old building, more land was gradually bought, and Bob East became one of the most prosperous farmers in the colony. He has now retired from the active management of his estate, and is, at the age of sixty-five, living in a large house in the suburbs of Sydney.

PLANTATION ISLAND

By GEO. MANVILLE FENN



CHAPTER I

“YOU black-looking, curly-headed, grinning-ivoryed son of a coal-pit! You’ve been watering this drink!”

“No, sah; de massa give it me like so, and—”

“Knock him down, Tom.”

“Hit him on the head.”

“No, no—on the shins: his head’s too thick,” were the suggestions that arose from a knot of sailors sitting and lying about under a veranda, which surrounded an apparently deserted house.

But the air of desertion was not blank: whitewash glistening in the sun, green-painted jalousies, and the gorgeous foliage of the trees around took off that; while a glance within the open doors showed casks, and presses, and bales that told of busy trade and warehousing. Overhead the sky was blue, of the most brilliant tint, while, but slightly subdued, the sea was glistening in a little bay, a couple of hundred feet below, where silvery breakers curled on golden sand, framed, as it were, in the gorgeous green of the tropic woods.

Primitive, but bright and clearly-cut in the won-

drous atmosphere, there were a few houses below, a tiny wharf, and a little schooner, whose rigging seemed pencilled in a darker blue against the mazarine of the peaceful bay. Up to the right, on the side of the mountain, and seeming to nestle in a grove of exquisite beauty, was a more pretentious house, with its green veranda, its glistening white walls, and clustering creepers, rich in blossom and cloying scent, climbing, clinging, and swinging from post to trellis and back again, in a prodigality of beauty that was all but tiring to the eye. Here there was an opening amidst the feathery palms, displaying richly-cultivated soil, coffee and sugar-cane; the one bright in its white blossoms, the other feathery, green, and graceful. Rest where it would, the eye lighted upon the richest bounties of Nature's efforts in vegetation, while from tree to tree flitted gaudy-hued, screaming parroquets, and before each trumpet-shaped blossom of some gaily-tinted convolvulus hung suspended, with wings invisible, those living gems, the humming-birds, ready to flash the next moment here and there sapphire, ruby, and emerald breasts across the wanderer's path.

The group of sailors, in their white duck shirts and trousers, had evidently lately climbed the steep pathway from the wharf to the deserted place, now turned into a kind of store or warehouse, since the building of the villa farther up the mountain. They were frank-looking, hearty Englishmen, with a careless disregard of everything but present enjoyment; and the opportunity for having a little boisterous fun out of the sturdy black, who had brought them some drink, was not to be set aside. The result

was that, from being hustled about, the poor fellow began to suffer exceedingly rough usage in the shape of blows and kicks; till one coarse-looking man, more brutal than the rest, gave the unfortunate black a kick which sent him down upon his hands and knees.

"Take that, you black-looking imp, and now be off with you."

But almost at the same moment, the sailor, to his intense astonishment, received a tremendous back-handed blow on the ear, which sent him staggering sidewise, and a deep, firm voice said—

"Let that poor beggar alone, can't you?"

The sailor recovered himself with a cry of rage, and turned upon his assailant—a fair, bronzed, muscular young fellow, who, with his hands now resting upon his hips, stood calmly watching his approach.

"I'll pay you for this, my lad," cried the sailor fiercely.

And he sprang forward; but only to receive a fair, downright blow between the eyes, which sent him back upon the grass, from which he rose shaking his head, when, seeing the black squatting down, hugging his knees with both arms, and grinning with delight, he made at him, but only to be stopped by the young fellow who had administered the buffet, who threw out one foot and tripped the man up, so that he once more fell heavily.

"Let the poor beggar alone, I tell you," he said, frowning. "They get enough from the overseers, without you being a brute to them."

The sailor was upon his feet again in an instant, and making at him who had protected the black. Blows were being exchanged furiously the next

minute; the other sailors closing round, enjoying the fight as much as did the black, who grinned and chuckled, and roared with laughter every time he saw his late assailant getting the worst of the fray. Directly after, though, the black gave a peculiar cry, as of dismay, and, darting amongst the trees, was out of sight in an instant, just as from the grove behind the warehouse appeared all in white, save the light blue ribbon round her broad straw hat, a fair-haired English-looking girl, whose bright eyes were dilated with surprise and horror as she approached the group where the two great athletic men were raging, tearing, and struggling together.

"For shame!" she exclaimed loudly, and with a stamp of her little foot upon the grass. "You who call yourselves Englishmen, to fight as do the poor degraded slaves here. Richard Lee, I'm ashamed of you!"

As if by magic the fray ceased, its cause turning muttering away, while Richard Lee, the young sailor, stood with bleeding knuckles, abashed, shame-faced, almost trembling, before the little queen, whose eyes flashed upon him angrily as she turned away; but only to stand again, scorching him as it were, for a few moments, as she glanced haughtily over her left shoulder, to repeat the words uttered but a few moments before—

"Richard Lee, I'm ashamed of you."

The next moment she had disappeared amongst the trees, and, relieved of the constraint caused by her presence, the other sailors began to banter and joke one another.

"You've put your foot in it this time, Dick Lee.

Miss Lena will tell all about it up at the house, and your leave's stopped ashore."

"Won't there be a spell of scraping the chain-cable for him, that's all," laughed another.

"Less for us to do, my boys, eh?" said another. "But what was the good of upsetting Jack Johnson about that nigger? He didn't hurt him much."

"Would you like to be hurt as much?" said Lee, firing up.

"Can't say as I should," was the answer.

"No, of course not," cried Lee, glad of having some one to attack—verbally, though, now—"of course not; and I'm sick of seeing the poor fellows treated as if they were no more than brute beasts. And as for Jack Johnson, I'd knock him over again if he did the same thing."

"If you'll take my advice, Dick Lee, you'll leave Jack Johnson alone. He isn't a pleasant fellow to affront. He's got his knife into you quite far enough, that's plain, and he don't forget being knocked down, I can tell you. But, howsoever, it's a great mercy as you didn't knock the liquor down too, for the land here's quite rich enough without being watered with that. If I was you, I should fetch Jack back, and make it up over a glass."

The speaker, about the most bluff-looking of the sailors, but slightly grizzled with age, lifted up the vessel, and, winking solemnly at his companions, he took so hearty a pull that it seemed as though, should Jack Johnson be fetched back, there would be nothing left for the making-up draught.

"Jack Johnson will wait a long time before I fetch him," was the careless reply.

The young sailor thrust his brown hands defiantly

into his trousers pockets and walked away, while the rest of the party drew closer beneath the shade, to share the liquor.

"Two less—two more whacks to divide, my lads, eh?" said Harris, the elderly man who had given advice. "More for us, eh? But I say, my lads, just look at that now: them two chaps fighting as they did, and supposed to be about that black beggar, when he was only the stick as they fought with."

"When you've done p'lavering, p'r'aps you'll pass that drink," growled one of the party.

For the last speaker kept one hand tightly upon the liquor-vessel.

"Ay, ay—to be sure," he said, passing it, but somewhat reluctantly. "But only think of them fighting like that. Old story, my lads. If ever you see two cocks pitching into one another, and sending the feathers flying, what's it about, eh? Why, about a hen, to be sure, as stands looking on, without a feather ruffled; and so it is where a couple of chaps get to knocks: sure to be a woman at the bottom of it."

"Why, there arn't no woman at the bottom of this, anyhow," said one of the sailors.

"Arn't there? Then what do you call that little dark-eyed lass up at the house yonder? Why, I see Jack Johnson and Dick Lee looking at one another as black as thunder when she come aboard the schooner with young miss, there, only yesterday, when the skipper had Mr. Ansdell aboard, and that long-legged, yellow-skinned Yankee overseer of his; and him, too, watching every movement of the skipper, as was as civil as possible, though I'll swear he didn't want him there."

"He come afterwards, didn't he?" said one.

"To be sure he did: a couple of the plantation niggers paddled him off, and if ever I did see an unpleasant kind of a fellow it's him. Stars and stripes indeed! It's plenty of stars and stripes some of them poor beggars gets, I can tell you, from that thick cane of his. Hang me if I shouldn't——"

"Air you speaking about me, my fren'?" said a rather high-pitched voice; "because, if you air, *perhaps* you'll say what you would do."

The sailor started, to see that he of whom he had spoken — a long, thin, bilious-looking American, dressed in white, with a broad-brimmed Panama hat, and a long, lithe cane in his hand—had suddenly stepped to one of the open windows of the warehouse, one door of which, opening to the grove, had enabled him to approach unperceived.

"I arn't a-going to tell no lies," said the man stoutly, as he folded his arms and looked doggedly at the new-comer, who stood smiling and showing a double row of exceedingly yellow teeth, while his dark, closely set together eyes twinkled maliciously—"I ain't a-going to tell no lies, Master Jefferson. I was a-speakin' about you."

"I kinder thought so, my fren'. And now, p'r'aps, you'll have the goodness to say what you'd do with me?"

"Well, if I was skipper of our ship, and I ketched you licking one of our men as you lick your master's black cattle, hang me if I wouldn't pitch you over-board!"

The vessel of liquor did go to water the rich earth, as the speaker rose to his feet in his excitement, and stood half expecting an attack; but the American

only held out one finger at the sailor, in an ugly, warning way, as he said, in a disagreeable nasal tone—

“Don’t you come up here any more, my fren’; but stop aboard the schooner. If there’s any mander of thing to bring up, let some of your mates do it; for I tell you, tew wunst, this place is very onhealthy, and you mayn’t find it agree with you. You belong to the sea, you do, so keep at sea; I belong to the shore, I do, and I’ll keep ashore; but don’t let you and me come together, ’cause we shan’t mix. And now you’ve brought the stuff up here, I think you’d all better go, and be smart about it.”

“I’ll give orders to my men, thank you, Mr. Jefferson,” said a fresh voice; and the captain of the little trading schooner, who had just descended from the house, now stopped short by where the altercation was taking place. “I told them that they could rest a bit; and when I want them to go aboard, I shall tell them.”

The tooth-baring smile faded quickly from the American’s countenance, as he turned, not to face, but to direct one of his ears towards the fresh comer—a well-built, frank-looking young man of thirty—not handsome, but with a quiet, determined look in his countenance, that spoke well for its owner’s possessing a warm heart, as well as a resolute firmness of character.

He seemed to make no effort to conceal the dislike he felt for the American overseer, who gave his shoulders a shrug, and walked away—turning once, though, to dart a malevolent look at the young captain of the schooner, who now directed his men to go down to the vessel.

“Strange, though,” he said angrily, “that you

men can't be ashore ten minutes without a quarrel: Dick Lee and Johnson fighting, and now you, Joe Harris, speaking rudely to Mr. Jefferson."

"No business to come listening, then—they as does, never hears any good of themselves," growled the sailor.

The captain did not speak; but pointed in the direction of the little vessel, standing a few moments to see his men well on their way back before retracing his steps towards the glistening house half-way up the mountain's side.

CHAPTER II

THERE was a grand view at the feet of George Brand—Captain Brand, as he was generally called here—a view of nearly the whole of Plantation Island, lying like an emerald in a sapphire sea, with that sea stretching out far and wide, with water ever meeting the eye save on the north, where a faint, cloud-like line told that possibly land might be there. Alone in the waters of the Great Mexican Gulf the little island lay—the home of the few busy enterprising families who had settled there, with John Ansdell at their head, almost their whole communication with the rest of the world being through George Brand, whose little schooner traded to and fro, carrying the island produce of sugar, coffee, and turtles to Jamaica, and coming back laden with such necessaries as the island did not produce.

But in spite of the glorious view, and the lavish bounties of nature, asking, on every hand, his admiring gaze, the young man strode up the steep

road with frowning brow, and his mind set upon other things. For he was uneasy in his mind; he was not content with the state of affairs there in the island, and he was looking forward to his next trip, of two months' duration, in anything but a pleasant state of mind.

In fact, he was recalling—no, it needed no recalling—he was going over again in his mind the remarks made by the merchant to whom all the produce of Plantation Island was consigned. The remarks were made on the wharf, at Kingston, just before the little schooner set sail on its return, and they were to this effect—

“If anything goes wrong on the island, Brand, mind this, I’ll make a contract with you.”

If anything went wrong at the island! What was to go wrong? What did it mean? He had asked himself that question a score of times, as he would have asked the gentleman who made the enigmatical remark; but there was no opportunity for doing so, the merchant having nodded shortly, and returned, while the schooner required the presence of its commander.

As far as he could judge, Mr. Ansdell’s affairs were in the most prosperous state—nothing, apparently, could be better; but, for all that, he was uneasy. The words had not been lightly uttered, neither were they spoken by one given to say much; and besides, since his arrival this time, with those words in his mind, he had noticed matters that would probably at another visit have been passed by unheeded.

He had dined upon the previous evening at the House, as it was here called, *par excellence*; and

there, to his great annoyance, he found Jefferson, the overseer of the plantation, present, evidently to share the dinner, they having parted only the hour before, taking different directions.

This set George Brand thinking again about the visit to his little vessel already alluded to here, when, unasked, Jefferson had presented himself at the side, and taken care to stay on board till Mr. Ansdell and his daughter Helena—Lena, as she was generally called—returned ashore.

There was that feeling of doubt and indecision in George Brand's breast which makes a man feel as if he were wandering in a confused labyrinth; and the thoughts that came thickly and fast always seemed to tend in one direction, and that was towards Phineas Jefferson. If there was anything wrong, and the old merchant's idea was not a mere surmise, Jefferson must be in some way connected with it; and if so, what of Lena?

George Brand quickened his steps as he thought; and he passed one turn of the track in time to hear a cry, and to see a sight which made him wince. On his left there was a large field of coffee, in which about twenty of the black hands were busily at work, tremulously eager, it seemed, to get on; for the cry the young sailor had heard came from a young girl, across whose bare shoulders the overseer's cane had descended heavily.

"A cowardly hound!" he muttered angrily, stopping frowningly to look on.

Only some dozen yards separated him from where the overseer stood over the girl, and upon catching sight of Brand an evil smile came across his countenance; and as if to show his authority, he raised

his cane, and once more it descended with a sharp *swish* upon the bare shoulders of the girl, who shrieked for mercy, as her soft black skin rose in great weals, to show where the blow had fallen.

It was too much for the equanimity of George Brand. Eager and passionate at what he termed gross brutality, he strode rapidly up to the overseer, and, with a voice hoarse with indignation, he exclaimed, "Is your master aware, sir, of your brutal treatment of his slaves?"

The American did not reply, but the sallow look of his countenance told of his rage, as, raising the cane, half menacingly, he seemed, for a moment, as if about to strike his interlocutor; but the next moment he allowed it to fall once more upon the quivering flesh of the girl.

"You cowardly dog!" cried the captain fiercely. "You dare not do that if Mr. Ansdell knew;" and, allowing indignation, dislike, and rage to get the better of him, he snatched the cane from the overseer's hand, held it for a moment as if about to strike, but the next whirled it far away.

In an instant the American's face was distorted with passion, his hand was thrust into the pocket of his jacket, and it was evident that he was about to draw some deadly weapon; but, as if warned by the action, in another moment George Brand had a pistol in his hand, standing his ground firmly, while the American muttered something that the other could not hear, and turned away.

"How confoundedly unfortunate! How hot-headed and Quixotic I am?" sighed the young man, as he once more began to ascend the mountain road, with the air each moment seeming to grow

purser and brighter—a brisk coolness, too, giving a tense feeling to every nerve and muscle as he passed on. “Here have I been wanting to be on the best terms with everybody, with what result? My men abusing the blacks, then disgracing themselves with a quarrel which she comes to stop; then another insults that yellow-skinned tiger; and lastly, after reproving them, I must needs go and quarrel with him myself.”

He here came to a turn of the path, and started as if he had been stung; for about a couple of hundred yards in advance he saw that which sent all the blood rushing fiercely to his heart, bringing, as it were, upon its swift tide the recollection of a score of little things that now seemed to have grown in an instant to a magnitude that troubled him more than he could have expressed.

For there, having evidently taken a short cut across the plantation, so as to avoid the windings of the path, was Jefferson, walking side by side with, and talking earnestly to, Lena Ansdell, who was half turning to gaze in his face; but with what expression of countenance it was impossible to see.

For a few moments George Brand felt giddy; this was so different from anything he had before expected. But no, it was absurd—it was impossible; and in his excited state of mind, he was ready to give every one the credit of being touched to the heart as he was himself.

And yet, upon the other hand, there were those many little instances of watchfulness upon the American's part, and his visit to the schooner now seemed to wear an air of importance which it had not before assumed.

Again he shook off the feelings, calling them folly ; but everything seemed to lead towards adding some tiny fragment of evidence that his suspicions, now newly awakened, were correct. Otherwise, why did Lena Ansdell walk quietly and patiently by the American's side, listening so attentively to all he said, even seeming to slacken her pace. It was, after all, only too plain, and during all these voyages to and fro, while he had been fondly hoping that there might come a day when he could declare the love that had grown up for his employer's bright, sunny-faced child, there had been this snake, slowly but surely making his way, coiling himself tightly round his victim, and ensnaring, fascinating her, as it were.

"What a fool I have been !" he groaned, "not to have known that a woman would not be content with worship at a distance ; and, besides, what am I, that I should presume ?—the skipper of a wretched little coaster !"

He did not, in the bitterness of his spirit, think then to ask himself whether he had not as good a right to presume as the overseer, but followed the pair slowly up to the house.

CHAPTER III

GEORGE BRAND'S intention, five minutes before, had been to complain to Mr. Ansdell of his overseer's brutality to those under his charge ; but upon entering the pleasant open room, it was to find Jefferson comfortably seated in the veranda, lolling back in his chair, and smoking a cigar, while,

quiet and subdued-looking, Mr. Ansdell was standing with one hand resting nervously upon a little table.

Lena was not there: she had evidently gone to lay aside her hat; and as the young skipper glanced round, it was to redden directly after; for upon meeting the American's eye, he saw that he had been watching him, with a half-amused, half-contemptuous expression, one, however, which hardly veiled a malevolent twinkle of the close-set eyes: a glance which told George Brand plainly enough that he had made an enemy—one who would never forgive, and who would have as little scruple in destroying his life as he himself would in crushing that of some noxious insect.

That idea flashed across him, but it did not give him the trouble afforded by his second thought, which was concerning the overseer's position on the estate.

What did it mean? To an observer it seemed as if, since the young man's last visit, master and man had changed places, so calmly insolent was the one—so quiet, subdued, and humble the other.

"Ah, Brand!" exclaimed Mr. Ansdell, making an effort to welcome the captain's arrival; "I am glad to see you."

But the side glance the speaker directed at his overseer almost belied the spoken words; and, plainer and plainer, each moment, could be seen that, for some hidden reason, there was a powerful constraint fettering him; so that Brand felt chilled, grieved, troubled, more than he could express.

"Have you got well on with your lading, Brand?" said Mr. Ansdell.

"Yes, sir; I think I may say give the word the day after to-morrow, and we will be off."

"Heaven give you a prosperous voyage, Brand," said the old man fervently.

"Amen to that, sir," said the skipper. "But don't alarm yourself: the hurricane season is past, and we shall soon run over."

"If you only knew how much depended——"

"Well, I don't know," drawled Jefferson; "but it strikes me that it ain't wise to tell everybody all about your affairs."

"It strikes me," said Brand sharply, "that it is not wise for the servant to interrupt his master."

"Look here, young man," said the American, leaning forward. "You're trying all you can to make me take you down a peg or two. I've put up with something this morning, and now I'm putting up with a bit more. You'll play with me till I bite!"

George Brand's angry retort was checked by an imploring glance from Mr. Ansdell; and to the young man's great surprise, his employer leaned towards the overseer, and whispered a few words.

"Let him keep a civil tongue in his head, then," was the surly response. "Look here, both of you: I'm like a lamb if I'm properly treated; but if I ain't——"

What Mr. Jefferson might be, if improperly treated, he did not say; for at that moment Lena Ansdell entered, looking pale, anxious, and languid, while, when Jefferson rose, and, with an unpleasant smile, placed a chair for her, she glanced at her father, their eyes met, and then, as if moved thereto by his appealing glance, she glided to the seat, and sat patiently listening to the remarks of the overseer, who divided his time, apparently, into three parts; one being appropriated to paying compliments, the

second to smoking, and the third to expectorating, in a most vigorous manner, right through the open veranda on to the flowers beneath.

Evidently in a constrained and uneasy fashion, Mr. Ansdell drew Brand aside, and began to talk to him about the most indifferent matters; and when, twice over, the young man led the conversation towards trade, he became aware of the fact that the American was listening intently, although, to a casual observer, perfectly indifferent; a glance followed, and Mr. Ansdell nervously led the conversation back to some unimportant subject.

"You will stay and dine with us, Brand?" said the old man at last.

Then there was a sharp, vicious look from Jefferson as, with his face drawn and agitated, Mr. Ansdell was about to speak again, when Lena half rose.

"Yes, you will stay with us, Mr. Brand," she said. "We have been most inhospitable this time, but we will try and make up for it now, before you go."

A moment before, bitter and despairing, George Brand was about to decline; for though apparently engaged in conversation with the old planter, he had been thoughtfully arriving at his own conclusions respecting the state of affairs—conclusions that merely wanted a little confirmation to make him set them down as correct.

For here was the servant almost assuming lordship in the house; the master was evidently afraid of him; and the daughter—"Good heavens!" he thought, "is she to be sacrificed to that vile wretch?"

What could be the cause? There must be money in question. Up to now he had always thought Mr. Ansdell wealthy, and sorrowfully compared his own

state of poverty; but the planter must be poor also, and by some means—foul, the thinker felt sure—Jefferson had attained a most powerful ascendancy.

“To be sure,” mused Brand, “money must be at the bottom of the affair; for what was said to me on Kingston Wharf, about anything happening at the island?”

He could not help it; there was a feeling of exultation pervading his breast; and though he tried to crush it down, he knew he was glad that Lena was poor. How his heart swelled at the thought of winning her love—of toiling for her; bringing to her his hard earnings upon his return from a voyage! What happiness there might be for him in this world if——

“Then I’ll set one of the niggers to pick a bunch of them every morning,” said a harsh, grating voice; and George Brand was back in the reality of life once more.

“Thank you, Mr. Jefferson,” was the reply; “I prefer gathering them myself.”

“That’s a lick for one of them, then,” said Jefferson, leering. “Do you know, Miss Lena, I allus lick a nigger whenever I’m disappointed. Now, a nigger I shall lick!”

A strange creeping sensation made every nerve and fibre in George Brand’s body to thrill. There was an intense desire upon him to dash at the Yankee, and seizing him by the throat, to shake him till his teeth chattered in his head, and then to kick him ignominiously down the mountain side, to the bay, where he could have had him ducked by some of the schooner’s crew. But he was compelled

to sit and bear it all, for the Yankee was master of the situation.

It was a cruel task, though, for a young and ardent man to sit and listen to her he loved imploring almost that the flowers, already declined, might be brought—pitifully, painfully asking for them; since the young girl's gentle heart was moved, and she knew that her refusal would be torture to more than one poor creature beneath the ruffian's charge.

"Oh, I don't want you to have them without you like!" said Jefferson surlily.

"But I'm sure Lena would like them, Mr. Jefferson," interposed her father—"would you not, Lena?"

"Yes, father," said the poor girl pitifully, as she hung her head, her eyes being fixed determinedly upon her work; while the overseer feasted and gloated upon her as if trying to be as offensive as possible to the young man, who had to strive hard to restrain the passion bubbling up within his breast.

But he was its master; and there he sat, patiently hearing all—hearing, but comprehending nothing of the babble of the old man at his side, so engrossed was he with the sight before him in the veranda.

"I will have half-a-dozen words with her before I go," thought the captain. "It is no time to talk of love; but surely she must need some friend."

The dinner was served, though, and partaken of, without an opportunity occurring. It was very evident that Jefferson was watching, as a cat might a bird; and unless something should occur to call him away, no opportunity would be afforded for a single word. It was very evident, too, that poor Mr. Ansdell

was to suffer for the lapse of which he had been guilty in proffering hospitality, for Jefferson's every word addressed to him was sharp, and almost insulting, as the meal progressed.

"Master—complete master," thought Brand.

And finding that Lena merely replied to his remarks in monosyllables, he confined his conversation to the father, listening still, though, to Jefferson, and trying to scheme some plan for arriving at the true state of affairs.

Mr. Ansdell had a love for luxury, and although cooked and served by black slave-girls, his dinner would have been relished in a London club, where its strange dressing, and tropic fruit and vegetables, would have lent a piquancy sufficient to cover all demerits. But no one seemed to pay much heed to the repast, except the overseer, who ate and drank heartily, laughing and talking loudly the while to Lena, who, pained and ready to burst into tears, seemed scarcely able to answer.

"You'll use every care, Brand, during your voyage," said Mr. Ansdell suddenly.

Upon raising his eyes the young man became aware of the fact that his employer must have been drinking heavily, for his face was flushed; and he now took no heed of his overseer's warning growl.

"Surely, sir," said Brand quickly. "You will soon see me back, if the wind keeps fair."

"It is so im——"

"Hold your tongue there, will you?" cried Jefferson, in a savage tone. "How many more times am I to tell you?"

Brand, in spite of himself, leaped to his feet, his eyes flashing, and the desire stronger than ever

upon him to seize the Yankee and kick him out; but he saw only two soft, imploring eyes gazing full in his, and a look that said but too plainly—

“Oh! for my sake forbear.”

Sinking back in his seat, he only allowed his eyes to rest upon those of the American, who, with an insolent stare, filled a glass with wine, and held it in his hand as if ready to toss it over the young man, but, changing his mind, drank it instead.

“I should think it’s ’bout time you went back to your boat, isn’t it?” said Jefferson, at last. “Them men of yours ain’t much to be trusted alone.”

“I ought to apologise to you, Miss Ansdell,” said Brand quietly, “for their behaviour this morning: they are so little ashore that they are given to forget themselves.”

“Yes,” said Jefferson, who now had drunk sufficient wine to infuse a courage he did not naturally possess; “and no wonder, when their captain sets them the example.”

There are limits to the reticence of the human being, and it was now evident that Jefferson had stepped beyond the bounds of endurance which confined the temper of George Brand. In an instant the peaceful, pleasant room, lit by its moth-circled lamp, the open window through which came the scent-laden breeze of evening, the silvery light flashing through the heavy green foliage without, even the presence of Lena was forgotten, and in another moment there would have been a passionate encounter, when a black ran through the veranda, peered for a moment into the room, and then leaped to where Jefferson, alarmed by this sudden apparition, had half started from his chair.

"What is it, Cato?" he asked hoarsely.

"The boys, massa—twenty of 'em—down the wood—fetich night—would go—broke away, and half-killed Brown Tom."

With a savage malediction, Jefferson, sober enough now, started towards the window.

He was back the next moment by Mr. Ansdell, who stared up at him half stupidly.

"Here, rouse up. D'yer hear?" he cried. "Get a gun and pistols. You, Cato, loose the dogs."

The black darted out without a word, but Mr. Ansdell barely moved.

"Do you hear?" exclaimed Jefferson again, shaking Mr. Ansdell violently. "They have broken out, and we shall have a row if we are not sharp."

"Yes, yes—I'm coming," said Mr. Ansdell confusedly.

Then hurrying into the next room, he returned with rifle and pistol.

"Now, then, be smart!" cried Jefferson, as at that moment from the trees outside came a low, deep bay, succeeded by an ominous growl. "Don't you be frightened, my dear; there's nothing to hurt," he continued, as he saw the pale face and horror-stricken looks of Lena. "I'll soon be back."

There was evidently something ominous in the news brought by the black, trifling as it sounded to one not versed in the habits of the slaves; and, with hands trembling with excitement, the overseer examined his pistols before returning them to his pocket, stepping then with Mr. Ansdell to the open window.

"But I say—here," exclaimed Jefferson the next moment. "You're coming to help?"

For a moment George Brand hesitated. He was

no coward, but it had suddenly occurred to him that here was the opportunity for which he had been waiting all the evening. Such a chance might never occur for him again, and rising, he said coldly—

“No, Mr. Jefferson: I have nothing to do with your slaves; I find it enough to do to control my men. You have urged the poor wretches to this by your brutality; now quiet them yourself.”

The American's eyes literally blazed with savage rage, as his hand sought a pistol, his first intention being evidently to try coercion to force Brand from the house; and he glanced from him to the pale figure on the opposite side of the table again and again, betraying his thoughts only too openly, and determining the young man in his course. At that moment, though, another black bounded across a moonlit space outside, rushed to the window, and exclaimed:

“Quick, Mass' Jeff'son, or dey all be gone!”

With a savage oath, the overseer ran to the window, dragging with him Mr. Ansdell, and then, turning, he shook his fist menacingly at Brand, and was gone.

CHAPTER IV

THE moment the room was clear, George Brand turned to Lena, who sat motionless almost with horror, gazing at him in a strange appealing way, that went to his heart.

“Yes,” he exclaimed, interpreting that look; “but moments are precious. Tell me first what does all this mean? The slaves?”

“Yes—yes,” exclaimed Lena, shuddering, as she made an effort to master her fear.

"They have been so ill-used by this man that they have risen?"

"Yes," she exclaimed. "I have been dreading it for long enough."

"But his power? What does it mean? Pray forgive me if I presume; but I have known Mr. Ansdell so long. I like my old employer, and it is pitiful to see all that I have witnessed this evening."

"I don't know—I cannot tell—somehow he has obtained a complete mastery here. My father has been led by him into some net, and he acts as ruler here. You know papa spoke—spoke of the vessel's safety?" she continued in broken words.

"Yes—yes," cried Brand eagerly, as he crossed to where the agitated girl now stood, trembling violently.

"All his hopes depend upon it, and if it fails it is his ruin!"

"But it will not—it shall not fail!" cried Brand excitedly. "There shall be no such ruin! But, Miss Ansdell—Lena—dear Lena—I have known you from a child. Do not think me presumptuous. I must speak before I am driven mad with what I see. You surely cannot—it is not true—this Jefferson—you do not love him?"

"Love him!" cried the poor girl passionately; and then, with a shudder, she resumed her half-passive state. "It is my father's wish," she said.

"Impossible!" cried Brand. "It cannot be! He has been overcome in some way by this scoundrel's cunning. I cannot bear even to think of it. It is no time now to talk of such matters; but pray, for your own sake—for the sake of those who love you dearer than life—let there be no more of this—this suitor's pretensions!"

"Please say no more to me!" said Lena pitifully. "You cannot tell what I suffer. I must do what my father wishes; it is necessary. But he is in danger now. You will go to his help? What's that?"

George Brand did not answer, but while she spoke he had, as he thought, seen a dark figure glide across the patch of light outside the window; and then it seemed to him that a black face, whose opal eyeballs he could distinctly see, was watching them from a clump of shrubs; while, the next instant, he could have sworn that he saw another face peering round one of the climber-hung supports of the veranda.

"It is nothing," he said in reassuring tones.

Then walking boldly to the window, he stepped out and looked round, seeing nothing, but fancying that he detected a retreating step.

The next moment, half expecting molestation as he did so, he quietly closed the windows, and drew the blinds over them, before returning to Lena's side.

"I am going after them now," he said, "and if it is necessary I will get up the schooner's crew. Do not be alarmed for him; but, one moment: Promise me that you will not be sold like this—that you will not give way. Dear Lena, there are others in the world whose love you have not proved. Only give me time."

He spoke in broken, confused words, but their honest truth was in their pathos; and as Lena heard them, the tears fell fast, and sobs shook her frame.

"I cannot—I dare not! You do not know all! Pray leave me."

"But, Lena—dear Lena!" he exclaimed, passionately seizing the little hand, which was not withdrawn.

The next moment he held her tightly to his broad breast, with her poor fluttering heart beating against his own.

It was but for a fleeting moment—the next had seen her start away.

“My father!” she exclaimed; “pray watch over him! Come here.”

He followed her into the next room, in one corner of which stood a gun; and, seizing it, he saw that it was loaded, an open drawer supplying bullets and powder.

The next moment he was at the door, adjuring her to see that all was secure, and not to open, save to a white man’s voice; when for an instant he again drew her towards him, and his lips lightly touched hers. Full of excitement, he was hurrying off in the direction of the slaves’ village, turning only once to see the light figure standing in the open doorway. Then the door was closed, and with nerves strung, heart exultant, and his veins throbbing with his new-found happiness, he hurried along.

He had not much difficulty, for though beneath the densely-foliaged trees all was intensely dark, here and there the moon broke through to silver some broad patch of the way—the well-beaten track which led to the cluster of huts inhabited by the slaves on Mr. Ansdell’s estate. There were shouts, too, to guide him, and the loud baying of dogs, while from time to time he listened anxiously for gun-shots.

But none came. There was a louder shout, perhaps, now and then, to make him quicken his steps, though he was already running; and once or twice, too, he stopped short, as a rustling in amongst the

trees told that either he was watched, or else that some half-wild animal was fleeing, alarmed, from his steps.

Emerging from the grove through which he had so far made his way, he now hurried along by the side of a great sugar plantation, the tall, green leaves softly waving in the breeze; and here there could be no mistake: a figure was evidently gliding along through the yielding canes, which bent, and moved, and rustled as it passed along, parallel with his course.

Twice he made a rush towards it; but the fugitive, or spy, was too active, and darted away from him; but upon his making another attempt, he neared his watcher, and pursued him rapidly, catching a glimpse more than once of a bent, running figure as it crossed some well-lit portion of the plantation.

"There must be something very wrong here," reasoned Brand, as he hurried on. "This fellow is evidently a scout, to see if help is coming."

CHAPTER V

NERVED by the thought that his capturing this man might—he knew not how—be the means of saving Lena Ansdell from danger, he ran on, gaining fast upon the fugitive, till he darted into another dense patch of verdure, when directly after there arose, howl, shriek, and cry, mingled with the savage, worrying growl of a dog.

Shouts, the report of a pistol, and the next moment, as the young man dashed into a glade, it was

to see in the bright moonlight the recumbent figure of a black, with a dog standing upon him, his jaws open, and red tongue out, lolling and curling up as the hound panted. Two other brawny-shouldered slaves were looking on, and both Mr. Ansdell and the overseer stood close by.

It was very evident that there was no danger, for they were returning from the village; but Jefferson was apparently deeply enraged, as he exclaimed—

“That’s Joe, is it?” pointing the while to the fallen man.

“Yes, massa, dat’s Joe,” said one of the slaves, the first who had come with news to the house.

“Bring him up in the morning. Let him go now. Here, Fang!”

The dog left his victim, growling savagely, and followed his master, but turned his head from time to time, as if ready to make another dash at the fallen black. But the poor fellow did not move a finger, even though he was smarting from the wounds inflicted by the savage beast that had been set at him; and after a glance back at the slave, Brand followed in the wake of the overseer and Mr. Ansdell, neither of whom spoke.

From one of the slaves, though, there was plenty of information; but whether true or false, Brand could not tell; his experience of the love of exaggeration in the slaves, as a rule, tempting him to believe that the man’s account was all invention, and that he had been instructed to hold his peace.

They were not long in reaching the house, where Lena was anxiously watching for their return; when, seeing that it would be out of place for him to enter, and content in his mind respecting the future, Brand

took his departure—one glance, which he obtained at parting, seeming to bid him to be hopeful, and that all might yet go well.

That was a glorious walk, down the hill-side to the ship: at every turn of the road there was some object of beauty to greet the traveller's eye. Now it was the heaving sea of verdure presented by some cane plantation shimmering in the moonlight; now the deep, dark mass of vegetation, where Nature held *fête*—a darkness relieved by flashing fireflies. Down below was the beautiful little bay, a sheet of polished silver wherever the moonbeams fell; and it was with his heart light and exultant that George Brand strode on.

So, then, everything depended upon him—upon his making a quick and successful voyage, did it? How he would toil for it—how he would strive! He would hardly leave the deck night or day. What a pleasure it would be to return and defeat the machinations of the lank, sallow Yankee!

“Phew!” exclaimed Brand. “It makes me hot only to think of the wretch pestering my darling with his attentions. I fancy, though, that he will find things rather different now.”

He seemed to forget that he was in a tropical island, and that the sensation of heat might proceed from the rapid rate at which he was walking.

But he did not continue that swinging down-hill walk to the end; for twice, in a sudden fashion, he stopped short upon hearing a rustling noise to the right or left, and here again he obtained a glimpse of a broad black back, upon which the moon shone brightly for an instant.

“I shall not follow,” muttered Brand. “Why

should I? The blacks are watching me; but let them. Poor wretches! they are slaves all day; night is their free time; let them enjoy it then. I should not be surprised, though, if they did turn upon their tormentors some day."

A profuse perspiration burst forth upon him now, as his active brain supplied him with a train of horrors, such as he had heard of being perpetrated before now; and if such a thing should happen, who would protect Lena?

"What a fool I am!" he said the next moment, laughing. "I've found a treasure, and I'm going to be always dreaming of being robbed. Eh! What! Hullo! what's this!" he exclaimed as a black figure darted out from a clump of bushes, laid a hand upon his chest, and as he felt a man's hot breath upon his face, a voice whispered—

"Massa skipper, no go dat way: not safe!"

As the man spoke, he pointed to another path by which the bay might be reached, but in a slow, circuitous fashion, and then, with a sudden leap, before he could be stayed, he plunged in amongst the dense growth and disappeared.

What did it mean? Was there anything wrong, or had they some fetich feast or mummercy going on, which he might disturb?

That must be it, he felt sure, and it coincided with the alarm up at the house. There was evidently nothing serious likely to be the matter, or Jefferson would not have given up so soon. It was absurd to make mountains out of molehills; and as to going out of his way down a long, growth-tangled, seldom-used path, when the regular beaten way was before him, that was out of the question.

"Besides," he said, half aloud, "how do I know that they don't want to lead me into a trap?"

He was so light-hearted that he was ready now to treat everything in the shape of trouble in the most cavalier manner; so looking upon the warning he had received with the greatest of contempt, he strode on, engrossed once more with the beauty of the moonlit scene; for your moonshine is wondrously beloved by your youth touched in love. All was now perfectly still, and he was getting close to the warehouse where his men had that afternoon been drinking. There was the schooner's light far below, and he could soon be on board. That had evidently been a trap to get him out of his way, for he did not even hear a rustle now of any one watching in the plantations on either side.

Another minute, and he was dreamily pursuing his path, mentally going through the incidents of the evening, and once more his heart began to swell with exultation, when, passing a part of the grove whence Lena had come to arrest the squabble between the sailors, there was a faint click heard, and a few seconds after—

Crack! The sharp report of a rifle rang out, to be taken up again and again by the echoes, fainter and fainter each moment, to die away in the distance.

But before the first echo had repeated itself, George Brand had plunged into the wood on his left, for a bullet had whistled by his ear, and he knew that his cowardly assailant must be close at hand, even where he had seen a flash.

It was but the work of moments; but though he dashed here and there through the dense leafage, it was in vain; the darkness was too intense; and

though he stopped and listened, no rustling leaf, no cracking twig told of an escaping enemy; and at last, more troubled in mind than he cared to own even to himself, he retraced his steps, vainly trying to conjecture why he should have been fired at.

“I won’t think that—I will not give him the credit, blackguard as he is, of so scoundrelly, so murderous an attempt as that. Perhaps, after all, it was only some poor slave firing at a night bird.”

Trying to win himself over to that way of thinking, he somewhat quickened his steps, till, reaching the little wharf, a hail brought a boat from the schooner, and he was pulled on board, to find that there was nothing to report, and soon after, he was dreaming of a bright future—heat, mosquitoes, tropic noises of the night, nothing having any effect in producing the wakefulness that might have been expected from one so moved to the core.

CHAPTER VI

THE rising sun found George Brand busy superintending the lading of his little vessel, so as to get a good stroke of work done before the heat should make the men sluggish. The tackle was rigged, the schooner warped in close to the wharf, and, one after another, the large sugar hogsheads waiting were rolled to the sides, parbuckled over a strong gangway, previous to being lowered into the hold and carefully stowed, the spaces between each being well wedged up with cocoa-nuts in their husky, fibrous envelope, till the last hogshead was stowed, when a lighter task began, namely, that of filling up with coffee-bags—a

dozen of the slaves being marched down by Jefferson to take part in that task, to the great relief of the sailors, who had looked on with a grim feeling of satisfaction.

"It must be a rare fine thing to have one of them woolly nightcaps instead of hair to keep the sun off, eh, Dick?" said Harris, the advice-giving sailor of the day before, speaking to Richard Lee, who was wiping the perspiration from his forehead.

"I'd rather have my own, and keep it off with a straw," was the reply, as Lee seized one of the coffee-bags and fastened it to the whip that was to lower it down the hold.

"I say," said Harris again, "what call has Jack Johnson to be so jolly thick with Mr. Overseer there? Every time he's been on the wharf they've had a palaver together. But, I say, Dick, did you see how pretty the skipper and that Jefferson squinted at one another? Hang me, if the Yankee didn't look as if he'd like to chaw the skipper up!—*Phew!*"

The whistle he gave at the end of this speech was upon seeing the wince given by his brother-sailor, just as a bright-eyed girl, whose creamy complexion, mantling warm in the sun, told of a slight mingling of the negro blood, stepped up to where Jefferson sat astride of a cask, smoking, and opening and shutting a large clasp-knife, which he struck at times viciously into the wood, when he shouted an order to one of the slaves.

The girl's mission was plain enough, for she handed a note to the overseer, and then stopped, waiting for a reply, glancing coquettishly at Johnson, who, with one hand to his face to hide a bruise, was evidently passing some compliment. Then she looked

towards the ship, turned her back, and began to talk earnestly to the sailor by her side.

Richard Lee gave vent to a sigh that was almost a groan, as he dragged away at the coffee-bags, till Jefferson wrote something on the note with a scrap of pencil, and handed it back to the girl, who gave one more coquettish glance at the vessel, and then tripped off.

"Ah, Dick!" said the old sailor, "they're rum cattle, women."

"Mind your own business, will you?" said the other, still toiling away unnecessarily hard at his work.

"That's my business, my lad; my business is always to give a bit of advice when I can. If I'd had a chance yes'day, I should have advised you not to fight with Jack Johnson; and if you'd ha' took that advice, you'd have had some grog. But just you look here, my lad: here's you and the skipper both making o' yourselves uncomfortable about the lasses. You've had your bit of a turn-up with Jack, and made an enemy of him; and it strikes me that the skipper has had his bit of a turn-up with that long, yaller caterpillar of a chap—all legs, you know. You both pretend it's about one thing, when it's about another. Now, then, lower away!"

The bag they were securing was lowered, Lee not saying a word; when an incident occurred upon the little wharf which, for a few moments, took up the attention of all around.

One of the blacks, in carrying his bag of coffee, managed to trip against a rope lying on the wharf, and fell; the bag burst, and the coffee-beans, to the number of a few hundreds, were scattered about the wharf.

Leaping up, the poor fellow, foreseeing his punishment, turned to flee; but he was too late: with one bound Jefferson had leaped from his scat, and with the hand containing the closed jack-knife, he struck the slave right on the temple, felling the man on the instant, for him to rise slowly, staggering, half-stunned, and bleeding.

"Hang me, Dick Lee!" growled Harris, "if I shouldn't like to advise you to serve him just the same, but I won't; it might end in a row. I'll advise myself instead to hold my tongue, and I'll take that 'ere bit of advice as soon as I've said as they uses them black niggers worse than so much cattle!"

"Ten times," said Lee, frowning, as he saw the slave come cowering back at his driver's orders, and begin to pick up the coffee, shrinking as he did so like a beaten hound.

"I'd give that old caterpillar a bit of advice, too, only he ain't worth it—a long-leggy old greyhound!"

"What would it be?—to go and drown himself?" said Lee bitterly.

"No, not exactly; but I'd advise him not to be quite so handy a-kicking and a-hammerin' of them poor black beggars. They don't forget it, Lor' bless you! and you may depend upon it, Dick, if ever they got the upper hand of Mr. Overseer there, they'd make it very hot for him!"

"And serve him right!" said Lee, in an undertone.

For at that moment he became aware that the skipper was close at hand, looking with a troubled face at Harris, who was now, though, as busy as the rest of the crew.

"Get 'em aboard fast, sir, now," said the old sailor.

"Yes, yes," said Brand impatiently; "but what

made you say that about the blacks? Do you think there is likely to be anything wrong?"

"No, sir; only I argufies like this, when I says to you, if you're driving a jackass, and have a stick with a nail at the end: 'Don't go a-sticking it into him allers, or, as sure as he's a jackass, he'll kick some day.'"

George Brand walked impatiently away to where there was a little awning spread over the deck; and then, evidently ill at ease, he stood smoking a cigar, and furtively casting a glance from time to time at where the overseer was bullying and hectoring amongst the slaves.

"No; I arn't heerd nothing," said Harris, tugging away at another coffee-bag; "but I've seen something, and it'll come sooner or later, Dick—mark my words if it don't. It'll be a row—a reg'lar hot row; and if everybody as lives here took my advice, they'd live somewhere else."

"Don't get croaking!" said Lee angrily. "What's the good of that? What have you seen?"

"Oh, I've seen these poor chaps, that shrinks and lies flat while they're hit and cuff'd about, roll their eyes after in a way that don't look nice, say what you will of it; and what I've got to say to you, Dick Lee, is: Don't you get kicking and cuffing of 'em about. Keep on taking t'other side, same as you did yes'day, and they won't forget it."

The hot hours coming, the sailors' task was at an end; for in the latitude where they were, it was impossible for any one but a negro to bear the full force of the sun in the middle of the day. But the slaves kept on with their part, bringing down bag after bag of coffee till evening, when the work was

resumed by those on board the schooner; and towards night, Brand knew that there was nothing to prevent his sailing some time during the next forty-eight hours.

He would gladly have gone up to Mr. Ansdell's house, and knowing, as he did, that the overseer would probably be there, he suffered no slight torment of a jealous nature. But there was ever the thought before him that, by hurrying on his departure, he was serving her, and therefore he restrained the feeling that prompted him to leave the vessel, and spent the evening busily over preparations that at another time he would have put off till the next day.

Completely tired out at last, he cast himself into his cot. He had taken his customary look round, and seen that all was well. The vessel lay well out in her moorings, head fast to the buoy, to which she had been warped as soon as the evening's lading had been ended; there was the regular watch set—two trustworthy men, one of whom was Johnson, and the other a half-breed, who had made several voyages with them.

But, somehow, that night George Brand could not sleep. He turned, and turned again, rose and altered the wind-sail, lit and half-smoked a cigar, rolled restlessly about till he was hotter than ever; but sleep, woo it as he would, proved coy, and he lay, at length, thinking of the past, of the present, of the future; and while elate with his hopes, and feeling certain that if Mr. Ansdell's prospects could be ameliorated by the success of this voyage, the evil time was nearly over, he could not help being troubled at the weakness the old planter evinced, and the com-

plete mastery that seemed to have been obtained by Jefferson.

"I believe he would gladly put an end to me if he could," thought George. "I wonder whether he fired that shot directly or indirectly. If I could only tell, hang him! I'd—I'd—I'll tell you what I'd do: I'd take half-a-dozen men, and we'd kidnap him. We'd carry him on board, and take the miscreant to Kingston, where they would try the murderous scoundrel. But there! I'm out of sorts, and given to putting the worst construction upon everything. The man's not so black as I am trying to make him out. He's bad enough, no doubt; but my feelings carry me away."

Three hours had nearly passed since he came down below, and at last, utterly worn-out with seeking for sleep, he rose and quietly slipped up on deck, to find that it was intensely dark, a thick veil of clouds spreading over the heavens, while the shore was not visible on account of the dense mist that was floating over the bay. There was something oppressive in the soft, damp, stifling heat, for not a breath of air relieved it, save now and then when a hot puff, as from the mouth of a furnace, seemed to cut through the mist, which, however, obtained the mastery again.

He walked to the side and leaned there, looking in the direction of the plantation-house, the lights of whose windows were always visible of an evening from the bay; but now the mist shut in the vessel completely, and, with a sigh, Brand walked forward and leaned over, to become aware that a boat was close under the bows—a canoe, apparently, though he could not distinguish its size.

“Ahoy! what boat’s that?” he shouted.

There was no answer, only the sound of paddles vigorously applied; and, turning hastily, Brand became aware that the watch was not on deck.

This discovery put the boat out of his mind on the instant; for though it might have been manned by larcenously-disposed negroes, who had intended to silently board the ship for the sake of what scraps of rope or loose gear they could find about, it was evident that they had not been on board, since it was probable, now he thought of it, that he had been leaning over the side during the last twenty minutes.

The idea occurred to him, though, directly after, that it was possible that his two men had taken their own boat, and he had gone forward just in time to hear them push off to row ashore.

Going aft, though, he soon found that this was not the case, since the only boat lowered down was swinging now at the end of her painter.

The next minute Brand was on the forecastle, and upon hearing his summons, Lee and Harris hurried on deck with a lantern, when a short search showed them Johnson and the half-breed curled up beneath the bulwarks fast asleep: a bottle, whose odour proclaimed strong spirit, telling its own tale as it lay empty, clasped tightly round the neck by the half-breed’s grimy hand.

“Where did they get that?” said Brand, kicking the bottle along the deck.

“Can’t say, I’m sure,” said Harris, rubbing his head and looking at Lee, who remembered the conversation between Johnson and the overseer upon the wharf. The next moment Brand also recollected that conference, and he stood for a few seconds trying to

connect one thing with the other; but there was no tangible point for him to take hold of—nothing but the bare facts that he had heard a canoe under the bows paddling away, and that these two men had by some means obtained possession of a bottle of spirit, and proved faithless to their task.

“I’ll talk to them in the morning,” said Brand, turning away. “Whose watch is it next?”

“Dick Lee’s and mine. If you’ll take my advice,” said Harris gruffly, “we’ll keep it—eh, lad?”

Richard Lee gave a ready assent; and, satisfied with those to whom he had now entrusted the deck, the young captain went down once more, to fall into a troubled sleep, in which he saw blacks swarming over the sides of the vessel, and slaying the crew till the decks were slippery with blood. Soon after, he was struggling to reach Lena, who was calling to him for help, while he was held down from aiding her by Jefferson, who had writhed and twined himself round him like some huge serpent, and his head, with its glistening eyes, was apparently moving to and fro, coming nearer, retreating, but always seeming as if about to strike with the glistening teeth which showed beneath its tightly-drawn lips.

He roused himself from that by a strong effort, but only to plunge into other troublous dreams, till, with a sigh of satisfaction, he awoke to find that it was once more day.

CHAPTER VII

A GLANCE round the vessel the next morning showed nothing to be missing: all was as usual; and shaking off his wild thoughts with the mist that was

chased away by the bright morning sun, Brand had the vessel once more warped in close to the wharf, finished the lading, gave instructions for water to be got on board, and then started off to the plantation-house, to announce to Mr. Ansdell that he intended to sail that night.

Jefferson was present, looking blacker and more bitter than ever; for since the visit of George Brand, the overseer had found a marked difference in the behaviour of Lena. Hope had dawned in the poor girl's breast, and hence trembling for her boldness, she had kept aloof, avoiding her persecutor in a decided manner, till, in his rage, he had loudly threatened to bring her to her senses in a way which she little expected.

Brand tried hard to obtain a few minutes with Lena alone; but he soon found that if he sought for that, he would have to postpone his sailing from day to day; and, with a sigh, he acknowledged that it would be far better to hasten his departure yet more. Though he knew that it was likely to prove to his own disadvantage if the voyage was hastened, and the vessel returned speedily, yet, probably from an intense dislike to the young skipper's presence, Jefferson seemed to fall in eagerly with his sailing that night; and Brand left the plantation-house before sundown, one long, lingering pressure of Lena's hand bidding him hasten back to her and her father's help.

The next minute, not daring to look back, he was hurrying down the steep mountain path to reach the wharf, where, giving his orders, sail after sail was shaken out, the hawser was cast loose from the buoy, and they slowly stood out from the island towards

the deep blue sea beyond the bay, Brand shading his eyes again and again to catch a glimpse of a waving signal of farewell where none was to be seen.

He had one recollection to carry with him across to the larger island, and that was the scowling malignant face of Jefferson, who stood upon the wharf watching the vessel till she was clear of the bay ; and there was also another remembrance of a few words he had heard Harris let fall as he was helping Lee to sheet home the mainsail, and those words were—"Take my advice, Dick, and keep at sea. Depend upon it, lad, we're a deal safer out here than that lubber is ashore !"

How the breeze filled out their sails as they rode clear of the island, and the little schooner began to dance over the long rollers ! There was a coolness that was delightful ; and free of the close, relaxing atmosphere of the bay, new vigour seemed to be imparted to each frame, so that every order was obeyed with alacrity, and all was soon clear, and the schooner running, with all the canvas she could carry, before the wind.

The stars came out bright and beautiful, glittering from an arch of blue that was almost black in its intensity ; there was peace everywhere around, the men sitting about, chatting and smoking ; but in the breast of their captain all was tumult. Those two recollections filled him with forebodings. Had he done right in leaving Lena near that unscrupulous scoundrel who, he now felt certain, had either fired, or caused to be fired, the shot that went whistling by him so closely ? and was there any peril in the island ? was there any other danger to fear ? He knew that there were about a hundred and fifty slaves on the estates,

while the whites who had chosen the fertile little place for their home did not number a dozen, all told.

Surely there could be nothing to fear; and, besides, Lena had always been most kind and gentle to every slave upon her father's estate.

"They must love her—they could not help it," said he, half aloud.

Nursing that thought in his breast, he worked hard to convince himself that there was nothing to fear, and that all he had to do was to carry on plenty of sail, and return as quickly as possible, to the eternal confusion of Jefferson, who would be compelled to hide his diminished head.

The next day came with favouring breezes, and the little schooner raced along. The next day, too, the wind favoured them; but somehow they did not make so much way, and old Harris expressed his opinion that the schooner's bottom must be getting foul.

"You'll have to careen her, sir, when we get into harbour. She's got barnacles and weed enough upon her to spoil any vessel's sailing; and it's rather hard on her. Take my advice, sir, and have it done."

"But she sailed well enough yesterday," said Lee uneasily.

"The wind was abaft then," said Harris; "now it's well off the lee beam. She'll do it easily enough to-morrow."

The morrow came, and an anxious day it proved; for the wind had chopped round right ahead, and a heavy sea was running, while the schooner did not seem to ride over the waves according to her custom.

"The cargo can't have shifted?" said Brand to the old sailor, in whose opinion he always placed great confidence.

"Shifted? Not it! I see as every cask was rammed tight in its place, and there's nothing there to move. She's opened a seam somewhere, and it's my belief there's a lot of water in her, cap'en."

An examination proved that the opinion was perfectly correct, and in half-an-hour a pump was busily at work sending a full stream of water out of the scuppers, but apparently with no effect on the vessel. For it soon became evident that water was pouring in below fast; and upon measuring the well, it was found that one pump was not sufficient to keep the water under. So another was rigged, the men working in spells, till, utterly tired out, they stopped short all at once, and stood looking at one another in despair.

"Come, my lads, this won't do," said Brand, laying hold of one pump-handle, while a bitter feeling seemed to press heavily upon his heart. "Here, Harris, Lee—lay hold here! Recollect, my lads, we have a valuable cargo on board—and we must save it, or ruin waits those at the island," he added, in an undertone. "She will float long enough to run into harbour, I hope. If she will not, there are the boats, and we can always make for one of the islands."

The men took their cue from their energetic young commander, and worked away with a will, telling one another, as the water foamed out of the scuppers, that they were getting the better of it now; and so they toiled on till, utterly worn-out, they paused to rest.

At the end of ten minutes, Brand called them to their task again, himself setting the example; but there was the report of him who had sounded the well to destroy all their further energy, for that report was

to the effect that, in spite of all their efforts for some time past, the vessel had made inches more of water.

"What does this mean, Harris?" said George Brand, looking his old fellow-voyager full in the face.

"Mean, sir!" said the sailor. "Well, I don't know; but if this here vessel was highly insured, and it would answer anybody's purpose well if she was to be lost, I should say that she had been——"

"What?" exclaimed George; for the other had paused.

"Scuttled!" said the old sailor emphatically. "Take my word for it, sir, there arn't no seams opened: the schooner's too true for that; but there's something wrong somewhere."

George Brand turned sharply away, and walked aft, for a flood of recollections was sweeping through his brain; and as he turned away, the sailor stared after him, and shook his head.

"Scuttled, Dick Lee—scuttled, mark my words if she arn't; but keep it dark, or there'll be a rush for the boats. I don't like him turning away like that, though; it don't look well."

But Harris, old and experienced as he was, could not read men's minds. He could not comprehend the puzzling whirl of thought that was then troubling George Brand, as he tried to reach the light hidden somewhere in a chaos of dark confusion.

Mr. Ansdell's future depended upon the safe passage of the ship, and her return, he reasoned at last, trying hard to piece together a trustworthy line of thought. If, then, Mr. Ansdell was well placed at the end of this trip, it would be to the disadvantage of Jefferson, who was evidently strengthening himself upon his

employer's misfortunes. It was, then, to Jefferson's interest that the schooner should not return. Would he, then— Nonsense! Impossible! No man could be such a fiend—it was out of all reason.

But then that boat, canoe, or whatever it was— what was it doing under the vessel's bows in the dark night? The men of the watch, too, both drunk; and that spirit, where did it come from? Had not Johnson been talking to the overseer upon the wharf time after time?

"I won't believe it, though—it's impossible!" exclaimed Brand half aloud.

"She's been scuttled, though, all the same," said a voice. And turning, the young skipper found himself face to face with Harris.

"How long will she float?"

"Four-and-twenty hours if we leave her alone, eight-and-forty if we keeps the pumps going," was the reply. And then Brand turned to look the difficulty full in the face.

"Look here, my lads," he said firmly to the men, who had clustered near one of the boats. "The weather is soft and calm, we've nothing to fear there; and as we've no women nor children with us, if the boats are over the side, and ready with biscuit and water, we can jump over into them at any time. So, now, see here. There are the two boats; lower them, and in with water and provision. Half of you can do that; you others set that flying jib and square-sail. Harris go to the wheel, and keep her well before the wind. We may run her ashore; if we don't, we shall have some miles less to row. But, at all events, we'll stick to the ship to the last moment. She shall forsake us, my lads; we won't forsake her!"

“Hooray !” cheered one of the men. And the rest set to work to obey their orders with the greatest alacrity. The boats were lowered over the sides, plenty of stores were placed in them, and then, a good length of rope being paid out, they were allowed to tow astern in the midst of the foaming water in the schooner’s wake ; for in the meantime the sails that had been added made her plunge on through the tops of the long, heavy rollers, dipping more than once so as to ship a little sea, which came tearing fiercely across her deck.

And yet it was a bright, glowing day, the breeze fresh, and the blue waters capped with glistening, pearly foam. It seemed hard to believe that there was danger on board ; and only those familiar with the schooner’s water-line would have noticed how deep she was in the water. The pumps had now been given up ; but, as a last resource, Brand was having a couple of spare sails drawn under the vessel’s bows, in the hope that the canvas might cross the leak, and to some extent check the influx of water.

That it was a hopeless task seemed to be the opinion of half the men on board ; old Harris, at the wheel, expressing himself pretty plainly on that subject to Lee, who had just come aft. “ Might ha’ spared himself the trouble, Dick ; but he’s doing his best.”

But, in spite of doing his best, now that every possible effort had been made, George Brand felt his heart sink. Here was the end, then, of all his sanguine hopes. His enemy had been more cunning than he, and the old man’s prospects, already dim, were to fade into absolute nothingness. And Lena ?

A groan escaped from him as he now saw that he had been worsted in the struggle. It was all plain

enough : a few holes bored with an auger just above the water-line, and these the additional lading had placed below, when his hasty departure had prevented the slight amount of water already shipped from being noticed. Here, then, was to be the end ; but he would fight to the last.

CHAPTER VIII

"How's the water, Dick?" said Harris, who was still at the wheel.

"Rising fast," replied the young sailor, who had just been below.

"I wish she'd rise fast, too, Dick," said the other, as he eased the vessel off a point or two. "She's like a log, and it's awfully queer work this. I don't seem to know her. Such a craft as she was, too! ready to ride over everything; but, Heaven save us, what's that?"

The old sailor's exclamation was drowned by a tremendous crash; for, just as he was speaking, his eyes fixed forward the while, he saw the deck about the forecastle heave up, one side of the schooner seemed to be dashed out, and as the men rushed aft to reach the boats, the water seemed to leap in with a fierce rush, causing the vessel to settle down rapidly by the head.

For the next few moments it was a wild struggle for life—some men leaping overboard at once, and swimming for the boats, others dragging at the painters; but many seconds had not elapsed before every soul had left the deck of the sinking vessel, and all were fighting for a place in the boats, in which, one helping the other, they were soon all seated.

Meanwhile, with a slow, rolling motion, the vessel heaved here and there, as if restlessly turning from side to side before making her final plunge into the darkness below. Her sails flapped and shivered, one splitting with a loud noise like the report of a gun, and then, as in speechless terror the men watched her, the schooner gave one final roll, and plunged head-first down, the air escaping from her with a loud hiss, and blowing up a part of the after-deck. She had already begun to sink, the stern rising slightly the while, when one precaution which ought to have been taken was for the first time forcibly drawn to the attention of the crew—the painter of the first was still made fast to the vessel, and if, in another moment, it was not loosened, the boats must be dragged down.

“Here! quick—quick!” half shrieked Brand. “In both boats there—the painters!”

A rush was immediately made; but the ropes were already tightening. It was a matter of life or death, and even if cast loose, they might be dragged down into the vortex made by the sinking ship.

“Quick, there—quick! Can’t you cast loose?”

“No, no, no—it’s too tight!” yelled the first seaman.

“A knife, then—cut away!” cried Brand.

But there was no knife forthcoming; and, as if gaining speed, the schooner glided down beneath the troubled waters.

Though George Brand looked so eagerly up towards the house as his vessel sailed slowly out of the harbour, and then turned away disappointed that there should be no farewell waved by way of encouraging him in his task, there were

longing, aching eyes watching the little vessel, and trying hard to distinguish his figure amidst the busy little throng coming and going, as they fulfilled the many little duties of the deck. And those eyes would have watched until the coming night had dimmed, and then blotted out, the taper masts with their well-filled sails and network of rigging, but that their gaze fell for a moment upon the path below the house, to see that Jefferson was coming up with long impatient strides, when, with a shiver of terror, Lena Ansdell glided away.

Jefferson caught sight of her, though, before she went, and waved his hand in a half-beckoning manner, as if bidding her stay; and then, with the corners of his mouth drawn back in a long, thin smile, he came close up to the house, altered his mind, and turned off to walk through one of the plantations, where some sixteen or eighteen of the slaves were at work.

It was strange to see the abject shiver of dread which ran through each shrinking form as the overseer approached, some of the slaves gazing down intently upon their work, others vying with each other as to who could be the most servile to the tyrant, who glanced here and there for a chance to find fault and administer punishment.

He was not long in discovering something. The cane he carried whistled through the air, and came down upon a shining black back. There was a yell, a leap forward, and then, hoe in hand—a weapon with which its stout wielder could easily have stricken down his tormenter—the black stood at bay.

“Do you call that work?” cried Jefferson. “If you don’t bend that back of yours, and send that hoe in a little farther, I’ll have you flogged.”

The man did not answer; but there was such a sinister leer upon his face, as he once more bent to his work, that Jefferson took another step forward, and again brought down his cane upon the bare back, making a long ridge of flesh to rise as if by magic. But this time there was no yell—no leap forward. Save for the mark, the blow might have fallen on something inanimate.

Jefferson stood aghast for a few moments, utterly taken aback. He recovered himself, though, the next minute; and, darting forward, he rained a shower of blows upon the offending slave, the others pausing from their work and looking on. But though the pain must have been intense, the victim of Jefferson's brutality did no more than wince slightly from time to time, till the overseer walked scowling away, his glance falling first on one, then upon another bending figure—all busy, though, now, tearing up the soft, rich soil with their clumsy hoes.

"Here, you!" shouted Jefferson, when he had walked on about fifty yards. And the black deputy who had brought the news of the *émeute* to the house came running up. "What does all this mean?"

"Dunno, massa. All sulky, and laugh at me and Brown Tom."

Jefferson walked, scowling, away, for a few yards before turning, and once more beckoned up his assistant. "Look here, Cato," he said, pointing to a pistol in his pocket. "You remember Sake, don't you?"

"Yes, massa — 'member Sake," said the negro, shuddering.

"Now go, then, and tell them all about him; for mind this: I'm not going to be played with. You understand?"

The black nodded, and rolled his great opal eyeballs. He seemed for a moment as if about to speak, for his lips moved; but if he had anything to utter, whether warning or request, it was checked by the overseer's imperious gesture, and the black ran off towards where the slaves were at work.

Jefferson made as if about to go back to the house; but the feeling of uneasiness prompted him to go on to field after field, where there were men at work, and at every place there was an ominous silence. Twice he struck some poor toiling hand, but only to find that the blows which used to draw forth yells and appeals for mercy were now suffered with a strange calmness; and he turned away at last, wiping the perspiration from his forehead, though he smiled a sickly smile, and muttered something about flogging; and then he turned round again, to find that the men were watching him, though they resumed their work as soon as they saw that they were observed.

"There's something wrong with 'em, hang 'em!" growled Jefferson to himself, as he tried to shake off a strange, uneasy feeling that troubled him. "They'd better be careful, though—they'd better be careful."

His thoughts were turned in another direction the next moment by a glimpse he obtained of the house above; and a grim smile crossed his lean face, puckering up his eyes, and forming long, ugly crows' feet at his temples, as he thought of the success of his long years of scheming against a weak man, whom he had now so far enmeshed that, as Lena Ansdell truly said, unless the schooner made a safe voyage, the plantation—all, must pass into the hands of the overseer.

"I ain't worked for nothing," muttered Jefferson. And then he turned, and shaded his eyes with his

hand, as he gazed out seaward with a strange, wild, anxious stare.

Five minutes later he was with Mr. Ansdell, taking his seat with all the quiet assumption of right, while the old man seemed to shrink away, half in dread, as his persecutor sat and smoked, and stared him full in the face. The lamp was lit, and the moths circled busily round the shaded flame, which was softened and subdued by a thickly-ground globe; but Jefferson shaded his eyes further with one hand, as he leaned across towards Mr. Ansdell.

"Why don't Lena come down?" he said.

The old man started, for until now his child's name had never been uttered by his overseer without the prefix, Miss.

"She is unwell to-night," he said sadly. "I think she has gone to bed."

"Now look here, Ansdell," said Jefferson, in harsh, grating tones, "don't you try to play fast and loose with me. Recollect, every penny of money I advanced you for your speculations was my honest earnings. You can't pay them advances back; so, according to agreement, you must give up the plantation. It's of no use for you to sulk about it: 'tain't pleasant—'twasn't pleasant for me to let you have my money; but you'd have been ruined years ago if I hadn't. You ought to be pleased, then, now, to have so easy a creditor—one who's ready to let you off so light. You ought to be grateful, you know."

"I am grateful, Jefferson—very grateful," quavered the old man helplessly.

"You have a very rum way of showing it, then, that's all I can say. Why, if I'd been any one else, I should have put in claims two years ago, and you'd have had

to make tracks; 'stead of which, what do I do? I let you go on easy, and even find you more money, and I say to you: 'Look here, I won't turn you out. I've a kind of fancy for that little girl of yours; I'll marry her, and then we can all live comfortable together.' What more can you want?"

"But the schooner? We have had a good season. Her cargo will go a long way towards freeing me, Jefferson," said the old man pitifully. "I want to pay you."

"Dessay you do," was the cool reply: "but now things have gone so far, perhaps I don't want to be paid. Fust, I shouldn't consider myself paid if you laid down every shilling on the table now!"

The old planter groaned.

"Now, look here," continued Jefferson brutally; "it's of no use for you to look black, and to make a fuss, and go on reckoning about the schooner coming back, because she won't come."

"Won't come!" echoed Mr. Ansdell, half rising from the table.

"Sit still, and don't get play-acting that fashion," said Jefferson, coolly lighting a fresh cigar. "No; I don't think she'll come. Every vessel a'most goes to the bottom sooner or later; and if they do go it's always at a time they can least be spared; and as she's never happened anything yet, now's the time—safe."

Mr. Ansdell leaned his elbows upon the table, and buried his face in his hands.

"There, don't go on like that," said the overseer. "Take it like a man; and look here—I want to have a few words with you about her, you know."

Mr. Ansdell's hands fell from his face, and the

light of the lamp fell upon a countenance that was pitiful in its helpless misery.

"Look here," said Jefferson, "I want you to talk to her a bit—to let her know a little more strongly that it is to be, and that, too, directly. I'm not going to wait and hang about while she goes through all her woman's fids and fads and ways. Tell her it must be directly; and, look here, Ansdell. I'm going to stay here to-night—fact, I think I shall stay here altogether now. 'Taint convenient going backwards and forwards; and besides, the blacks have got a sulky fit on, and I fancy they may be a bit out of a night."

Without a word, Mr. Ansdell rang a hand-bell; a black servant-girl entered, the necessary orders were given, and then he leaned back in his chair in silence, while Jefferson smoked furiously.

CHAPTER IX

LENA ANSDELL had truly said that she was unwell, and that night she sat near her open window, gazing out at the bright moon, which shone down upon the sea of mist below. Her heart was sore, and the future full of clouds. Below her, she could hear the murmuring of voices, one of which she recognised by its harsh tones; and more than once she started, as she fancied that her name was uttered, the sounds ascending to the open window.

So far she knew that she had been weak and ductile, ready to yield to her father's every wish; but as she sat there now, the thoughts were strong upon her whether she could not help her father in his sore need otherwise than by selling herself, as it were, to a man she hated.

A slight rustling close below her window took her

attention, just as despair was beginning to resume its sway, and, drawing closer, she stood in the shadow watching, she knew not why, a couple of black figures stealing softly along by the trees, till they reached a spot from whence they could peer into the room below.

A cold, damp perspiration stood out upon the poor girl's forehead; and, as she recalled the alarm of a night or two before, she remained, chilled with terror, as she thought what might be the consequences should the slaves rise against them.

Such things had happened, she knew, and with horrible barbarities perpetrated upon those who held them in bondage. There were only three other white families upon the island, while the slaves were as fifteen or twenty to one.

Had she grown weak and foolish, she asked herself, that the sight of a couple of men should revive such terrors? She could not say; but the horrible dread was there. And now she recalled that during the past few days her little acts of kindness towards the women at the village had been received in a distant, half-surly way, which, coupled with the many brutal acts of oppression exercised by the overseer, and the alarm of the rising, now seemed terribly ominous.

"But my father has always been so kind," she thought, "and—" She paused; for just then, from outside, a low, husky voice whispered her name twice.

CHAPTER X

LENA's lips parted to answer, though she felt that she ought not, when there was a fierce growl, the rush as of heavy bodies through the low bushes, and directly after the sound of an overturned chair, and Jefferson

darted out, his voice being directly after heard talking to one of the dogs always kept about the place, before returning to the sitting-room, when Lena heard the window closed, and the shutters drawn across.

What could it mean? Who could want her at such a time?

Troubled more than she could say, she sat at the window for fully half-an-hour, when her attention was once more taken by a stealthy figure, which came out into the moonlight, and seemed to make signs to her, every one of which was perfectly incomprehensible; and then the figure seemed to plunge into the wood.

She was puzzling herself as to who it could be that had evidently recognised her, when her door was softly opened, and Jenny, the creamy-complexioned girl who had borne the note from Mr. Ansdell to Jefferson upon the wharf, stepped into the room, shivering with dread, her face drawn, her eyes dilated, and her breath coming in sobs.

"Jenny," exclaimed Lena, running to her, "what is it?"

The girl tried to speak, and caught at her mistress's dress; but something seemed to choke her, and, with a burst of hysterical sobs she fell at her feet.

With a quiet, womanly movement, Lena passed her arm round the girl, and tried to soothe her; but by an effort, urged thereto by the dread intelligence she had to convey, Jenny forced back her emotion, and exclaimed huskily—"Quick, Miss Lena—downstairs! We must hide."

"Downstairs—hide?" exclaimed Lena in bewildered tones.

"They are going to burn the place, to kill master and Mr. Jefferson, and then take us away!"

"Absurd — nonsense!" exclaimed Lena, whose heart beat faster. "But you do not say who—who told you this?"

"Old Lily, miss, just now. Soc, that man down the village, is with her, with his wife and baby. You know—the one you gave things to."

"Yes, yes," exclaimed Lena hurriedly.

"Soc came to the window to try and speak; but Black Crab flew at him, and Mr. Jefferson ran out. Soc has been badly torn by the dog, and he dare not stop; but they came round afterwards to the back."

"But it cannot be!" cried Lena pitifully. "They must have been mistaken."

"Oh, no, miss—no. Soc's wife says the hands are all mad against Mr. Jefferson, and master too, for letting him beat them; and they're going to—to—Oh, Miss Lena—Miss Lena, I daren't tell you; it's too horrible!"

"Here, quick!" exclaimed Lena, rising to the occasion, as the poor girl broke once more into a passion of hysterical weeping.

Catching Jenny by the arm, she half dragged her down to the kitchen, where the slave, his wife and child, and Lily, the black cook, stood shivering in a group.

CHAPTER XI

"Is this true, Soc?" asked Lena quietly.

"Yes, Missy Lena, all true, every word as sure——"

"Hush!" she exclaimed, checking the man. "Tell me what it all means, and quickly."

"Yes, missy. Boys say, if stop any longer, Massa

Jeff'son cut all 'em livers out, and make 'em die, and dey say be hang if dey tears hair any longer, and dey all swear in de woods round a fire, dat dey'll kill him, and cut him heart, and—— Dere, I won't tell 'ee any more."

"Come here," exclaimed Lena, who read but too plainly in the black's shivering features that he spoke the truth. "How is it you are not with them?"

The slave looked at her, then at his wife and child; and then, without a word, he darted towards the speaker, caught her little white hand in his, and held it to his great broad black breast for a moment before he let it go.

The tears started from Lena's eyes, as she saw the poor fellow's meaning; but there was no time for indulgence in emotion.

"Come here! Let us go and tell my father."

"No, no, missy; Massa Jeff'son kill him dead if go in dere, and den who take care of Clio and de pic'ninny?"

"What's all this here?" exclaimed Jefferson's grating voice; and all the group started, for he had entered the kitchen unperceived. The woman cowered over her child, and Soc, the great stalwart black, seemed to allow every nerve and muscle to slacken, falling down upon his knees before his savage master.

"Here, you get up, you black skunk!" continued Jefferson, as there was no answer; and he kicked the slave fiercely till the poor wretch rose, when he caught him by the throat. "It was you skulking by the window an hour ago, wasn't it? Speak, will you, you brute, or I'll flog you!"

As he spoke, he half strangled the man, who,

spiritless from long ill-usage, would as soon have thought of flying as of offering the least resistance.

"You coward!" exclaimed Lena indignantly; and in a moment it seemed that all the girlish softness had departed from her nature, as, with eyes flashing, and nostrils distended, she took a step forward, and, to the intense amazement of the overseer, struck him smartly with her little white hand in the face. "How dare you ill-use that poor creature! It is your brutality that has brought us to this pass. The slaves have risen, and have sworn to have your blood and your master's. Now, try and save us, if you can!"

Pale with rage and astonishment, it seemed for a moment as if the overseer would have struck the frail but unflinching figure before him. The last words, though, acted upon him, so that he shrank back, staring from one to the other, his eyes resting last upon Mr. Ansdell, who now came trembling into the apartment where they stood.

"It's false!" he exclaimed, at last, recovering himself. "That black scoundrel has invented it. They daren't do it."

"Look—look, massa — massa!" exclaimed the slave, dancing about in his excitement, as, forgetting his dread, he involuntarily pointed to the witness of his words in a dark red glow, which now showed through the window, and illumined the opposite wall. "Dat's de warehouse, and all um sugar casks burn, and dey're coming on here."

With a cry of rage and dread, Jefferson rushed to the window and threw it open, just as a brighter flash darted up over the trees; and as he saw indeed that it was the old house half-way down the mountain-side that had been fired, a loud shout, and the

busy hum of many exulting voices, fell upon the ears of those within the room.

Like some savage beast at bay, Jefferson drew a pistol from his pocket, and turned to gaze upon the slave, who crept for an instant behind Lena, but directly after went and stood by his wife and child.

Lena followed, and faced the armed man, who stared at her as if aghast at her proceedings. She seemed so changed from the gentle, forbearing girl of an hour ago that he could not comprehend it.

But there was no time for other thoughts than those which related to their personal safety, for even as the overseer stood there the shouts and hubbub increased, every now and then rising to a howl like that of a troop of rejoicing fiends. The red glow grew brighter, keen tongues of ruddy flame darting up above the trees; and a cruel pang or two shot through Lena's breast as she thought of the happy days she had spent in that old home, before it was made a warehouse, and the more pretentious residence built. Then she recalled her last visit there, and the struggle she had stayed, and devoutly wished that George Brand and his stout followers were there to help her.

Her musings were interrupted by Mr. Ansdell, who, roused by the imminent danger to the necessity for immediate action, forgot his minor troubles in this greater one, and exclaimed, "Quick, Lena—your hat and cloak! We must try and get down by the wood path to the bay; we can then cross to Wilton's."

Lena ran out, and returned in a minute—one that had been seized by Mr. Ansdell as an opportunity for arming, their insecure life making the possession of firearms to be considered as a matter of course.

As for the overseer, he seemed to be completely unnerved, and turned from one to the other in a wretched, helpless way, as if he expected them to make some special effort to save him.

The sight of Lena, though, seemed to rouse him, and, examining his pistols, he held out his hand for one of the rifles Mr. Ansdell had just brought into the room, when a half-suppressed scream from Jenny made all turn to where the frightened girl was pointing towards the window.

A glance showed them, in the faint red glow, the outlines of a black, who was evidently watching their every movement.

Without pausing to consider the wisdom of the act, Jefferson, with a motion quick as light, raised his rifle and fired, with the effect that, following instantly upon the report, came a wild shriek, and then the rapid, crashing noise of a body rushing through low underwood.

"Not down," said Jefferson, grimly beginning to recharge his rifle.

But to all present it now became evident that the report and the shriek had been heard by the fire; for there was a rush from the mountain-side.

"They'll be here directly!" half shrieked Jefferson. "Here, Ansdell, help fasten this window. They'll be like so many fiends broke loose—they'll murder us without mercy."

"They'll murder *you* without mercy, if they take you!" muttered Mr. Ansdell, whose face seemed, in the dire emergency, to lose its aspect of broken manhood and indecision. "The greatest act of kindness you could do to us now would be to escape, and leave us to run the risk."

"No, no—no, no!" said Jefferson hoarsely. "I won't leave you—I can't be alone! Here, Jenny—quick! The next room—some brandy!"

The girl fetched the decanter, and he drank from it as though the strong spirit had been water. Then he turned to Mr. Ansdell.

"What are we to do?" he said.

"Escape," was the laconic reply. "I dare not face these poor savages, roused as they are now, with you by my side. The road is open towards the bay perhaps yet. Come, Lena."

Without another word, he caught Lena by the arm, threw open a door at the back, and stood listening; while, as if loth to be alone, Jefferson would have taken Jenny's hand, only the girl repulsed him, and ran to the side of her mistress, while the slave caught up his little one, and closely followed.

The overseer glanced darkly from one to the other as he saw how he was avoided; but this was no time for resentment, and he followed out to where the forest came close up to the back of the house, and then for a minute they stood listening.

They were in the deep shadow cast by the heavy foliage; but the house stood out clearly defined against the reddening sky. There was not a sound to be heard, though—an ominous sign, for it told that, leaving the flames to finish that which they had begun, the slaves were approaching silently to fire the house; and, well used as they were to every intricacy of the dense woods around, it was a hazardous venture to attempt to thread them by night, since even if they avoided meeting with any of the party, they would be rapidly pursued, and probably overtaken before they could reach the bay.

There was the chance, though, that the slaves might not find out that they had forsaken the house for some little time, and that would perhaps enable them to escape; but the hope was dashed to the ground by the recollection to which Mr. Ansdell gave utterance aloud:

"We have left the door open, and they will see that we have gone."

He glanced at Jefferson as he spoke; but, with an oath, the overseer told him to hurry on; and this little advantage would have been denied them but for the heroism of Jenny, who darted back, and they saw her with fear and trembling as she crossed a comparatively light portion of the ground, and ran towards the house.

"Brave girl!" muttered Mr. Ansdell.

He said no more; but, like the rest, stood listening and watching for her return.

The moments seemed hours before there came on the terrible stillness the sharp sound of the closing door; then the girl's light form was seen running across the light, till, half-confused, she stopped, as if not knowing the direction in which the fugitives awaited her coming.

If the slaves should approach now! They would see her, and follow.

Mr. Ansdell shuddered; but nerving himself, he uttered her name as loudly as he dared.

The girl turned, and bounded towards them with a cry of joy. "Oh, sir," she cried, panting, "I thought you had all gone and left me."

No other word was spoken; but they listened for a moment to try and detect some alarm note. But no, all was still as death; even the customary

noises of the forest were hushed—a strange sign, which told that there were other footsteps there, stealthy feet, and dark bodies creeping cautiously through the low undergrowth—so that the dread silence was harder almost to bear than would have been the cries of those in pursuit.

It was as they had suspected: the shot had roused the slaves from their orgie of fire, and while they had stopped listening, the wounded man who had been watching the house dashed in amongst them, staggered for a moment, and then fell heavily upon the earth.

There was no shout raised; but the party, quite a hundred strong, as if moved by the same impulse, spread rapidly out, each man seeking his own way to the house, not by the regular path, but spreading out through plantation and wood, and then creeping forward after the fashion of so many wild beasts about to spring upon their prey.

CHAPTER XII

THE fugitives had not gone fifty yards through the dense undergrowth, each moment expecting to see an enemy start up in their front to stay their farther progress, when, as if rising from all sides of them, came as diabolical a yell as ever issued from human throats. It was the wild triumphant cry of those who had turned at last, after years of cruel oppression; and, speaking as it did of a determination to have ample revenge for all past afflictions, it was well calculated to send a chill of horror through the breasts of the trembling women.

"Dat's dem come," said Soc quietly, speaking with all the calmness of one without fear of danger, to those whose lives were in their hands.

"Pass on!" said Mr. Ansdell in a hoarse whisper. "It's a chance, but we may get through them."

He took the lead, and, with the boughs rustling and snapping on all sides, they continued their perilous journey.

Twice they stopped short, as the trunk of some tree was magnified into a foe; but they soon found that at present the danger was entirely in their rear, where the shouts grew louder and louder as the party was strengthened.

"What's that? Where did they get guns?" whispered Jefferson, as a couple of reports rang out on the still night.

For answer, Mr. Ansdell pointed over the trees in another direction, where the red glow of flames, hitherto unnoticed, could be seen tingeing the sky.

"Why, they've been up to my place!" cried Jefferson. "They have burned that too!"

"Dey burn dat firee, massa," exclaimed the thick voice of the black; "and dat's where dey say dey mean eat you' heart."

Jefferson made no answer; but those who were nearest could tell that he was shuddering with dread.

The path chosen was one but seldom used, and the rapid tropical vegetation had choked it so as to render it almost impassable. Could they but keep on, though, for another quarter of an hour, they would reach the end of the bay, where some boat or another could be found to convey them, if not to safety, at least to the company of others of their own people, who would join with them for mutual

defence—unless, indeed, they should already have taken the alarm, and fled farther inland.

“They are after us, and coming now fast!” whispered Jefferson in horrified accents, as a loud shout in their rear proclaimed some discovery on the part of the enemy.

The overseer was right; for now, in place of the noise, there was once more a dead silence, and another lurid light shot up to tell of the work of destruction being carried on in a fresh direction, the lightly-built, shingle-covered houses flaring up in a rapid way, so that the whole heavens glowed; while below, in the forest path, all was dark, even to blackness.

The ominous silence once more told that the blacks were coming on; and in momentary expectation of hearing their shouts, and being surrounded and dragged to death, or, for those who were with them, worse than death, Mr. Ansdell and the overseer pressed on.

Another hundred yards and they knew that they would be at the water’s edge, though they might have there, perhaps, some distance to go along the sands before they found a boat. But already there was a faint, rustling sound of pursuit behind, and, nerved by the dread engendered by each faint noise, they plunged almost headlong down the sharp, rugged descent, to stand at last upon the smooth beach.

Where they first reached the sandy shore they knew that it would be impossible to find either boat or canoe; so they pressed on in a diagonal direction towards the water, the darkness favouring them in their flight over what was now perfectly level.

There was a pleasant, cool breeze, too, blowing

from off the bay, most refreshing after the dense, stifling dank heat of the lower part of the wood they had traversed—a heat that had more than once nearly overpowered Lena, in spite of her efforts to retain such strength and presence of mind as should aid him who held her arm.

They crossed the sands at a run, and Jefferson dashed into the shallow water, looking here and there as he stopped for one or other of the canoes usually lying there; but as yet not one was visible. Then, with lowered hands, he walked rapidly along, trying to touch the mooring rope which should hold some boat. But no: nothing touched his hand, Mr. Ansdell being as unsuccessful; while moment by moment the horrible thought pressed upon them that they had been forestalled, and that every boat and canoe had been cut adrift.

The slaves were close after them, too, now, and, no matter how they hurried, they must be overtaken. Even if they contrived to hide for the dark hours, they must be hunted down at daybreak: and, with a groan of anguish as he thought of his child's fate, Mr. Ansdell drew his pistols, and cocked them before they were replaced in his breast.

In spite of all, they hurried on, as if nature prompted to fight to the last; but their pursuers were now swarming out of the wood which they had themselves so lately left.

“Here, quick—follow me!” whispered Jefferson.

And, evidently beside himself with horror, he dashed into the water, as if to swim out. The next moment, though, he had seen his folly, and, as if drawn back to Lena's side, he ran on with them.

If the schooner had only stayed but a little longer!

was the thought of all there—a brave captain, a stout crew, and refuge for them all. A short struggle, and they could have reached the wharf. But that was of no avail now; and their pursuers gained on them fast.

“Escape, father! Run—pray run!” panted Lena at last—“I can do no more.”

A groan of despair tore from Mr. Ansdell’s breast, as he passed his arm round the slight waist of his child, and so helped her along for another hundred yards, when she stumbled, and fell to the ground, Jenny throwing herself on her knees at her side, uttering a wild, hoarse cry of fear, as she clung to the recumbent form.

“Here, quick, Soc!” cried Mr. Ansdell.

The black passed the child to his sturdy wife, and in a moment raised Jenny in his arms, as his master caught up Lena, Jefferson having run on; but, like a rat at bay, returning again. And then, without a word, they pressed on once more for a hundred yards, when arms were prepared, and they stood ready to sell their lives as dearly as they could.

“A couple of shots each may check them,” said Mr. Ansdell. “We can but try. I can go no farther. Are you ready?”

But Jefferson made no reply, for his attention was taken up by the movement of Soc, who had turned seaward, listened for a moment or two, and then said softly—“Boat’s coming!”

“Where?” cried Mr. Ansdell: and as soon as he had spoken he heard the splash of oars.

It was a dangerous experiment, as it was telling the blacks exactly where they were: but it seemed their only chance for safety, since the thought had

flashed across his mind that the boats might be from one of the plantations across the bay, and he shouted loudly—

“Here, quick—quick! for Heaven’s sake! Help!”

He regretted it the next moment, for the thought came now that it might be a party of the slaves who held possession of the boat.

There was a loud yell, too, now, from those who were pursuing them along the sands, as they came rapidly on; but thrice welcome to the ears of those who were so near to a cruel death came the loud, cheery cry off the bay, as the splash of oars was heard more plainly—“All right!”

Without a moment’s hesitation, Mr. Ansdell now caught up Lena and plunged into the water, here shallow, and shelving gradually down. Soc carried Jenny; and, only stopping for a minute, to utter a savage oath or two, as he discharged his rifle and both pistols in the direction of his coming enemies, Jefferson also waded in.

They knew that it was to be a case of moments whether safety or death was to be their portion; and, to Mr. Ansdell’s horror, he found that, directly the firing was heard, the splashing of the oars ceased; so that he had to cry for help again and again before it was renewed, the party in the boats having taken the alarm.

The welcome sound was once more heard as they waded on, the water now close up to their armpits. They could not see the help, though, yet; but, to their horror, there were some of the blacks splashing in after them through the water.

“Massa swim to boat,” said Soc—“Clio swim too.”

And, without a moment’s hesitation, the faithful

fellow struck off with his burden—poor Jenny!—in the direction of the coming boat, his wife swimming beside him with ease, as she held her little one's head above the water with one hand.

Mr. Ansdell mistrusted his strength; but it was, he knew, their only chance, and, loosing his hold of his rifle, he lowered Lena down into the water, and pressed forward.

Panting, exhausted, burdened with a heavy load, he soon found that he had overtaxed his powers—that he was an old man now, prematurely aged by trouble and a relaxing climate. There was one thing he knew, though, that gave him a hopeful thought, as again and again the strangling water rose above his nostrils: they were beyond the reach of the slaves, and a more merciful death was to be their lot.

He bravely struggled on, though; Lena, now insensible, lying passive upon the water, as he tried to force his way on. It was years since he had even tried to swim; and now that he was attempting it dressed, burdened with heavy pistols in his breast, no wonder that his every effort failed to keep him afloat. The water, smooth as it was in the landlocked bay, swept over him; the noise of thunder was in his ears; and in the midst of a terrible confusion of intellect, he sank, struggled to the surface, sank again, then all seemed over, when he felt, in a half-dreamy way, that he was seized; and his next recollection was lying weak and prostrate in the bottom of a boat.

CHAPTER XIII

IN a few moments Mr. Ansdell struggled up, to find that they were being rowed across the bay.

"Are all safe?" he gasped.

"Yes, I reckon we're all here," said a too familiar voice. "It was a narrow squeak, though."

"Very narrow," said a voice—"so narrow, Mr. Jefferson, that if there had been another inch you would have thrashed no more niggers."

"Ah, Wilton, is that you?" said Mr. Ansdell faintly.

"Yes. We were rowing across, having been alarmed by the reflection. We thought it an accident, and were coming to help. This is terrible work, though. Lay into it, my boys, for Heaven knows what may be wrong when we get back!"

Silence fell upon the occupants of the boat, who could, however, hear plainly the dull, confused murmur of voices upon the shore; while, as they rowed farther and farther out from beneath the land, the devastation of the fire became more visible, three glowing lights still flaming away from amidst the thickly wooded mountain-side.

There was silence in the boat, but the thoughts of all were busy as they went over the perils to be encountered—Mr. Wilton, the owner of the other plantation, trembling for his own home; for it was only too probable that the rising would be general throughout the island, and he had a wife and daughters there. Then, too, there was the family at the corner of the bay who ought to be warned; and he was going over in his own mind the best way of giving them the alarm, when a hail from another

boat proclaimed that the parties in question had taken the alarm.

"What's best to be done, then?" exclaimed a voice from the other boat.

"Bring every one of your people, and every grain of powder and ounce of lead, up to our place, and we'll hold out to the last. We may, perhaps, keep them at bay till the *Volage* comes back."

Mr. Ansdell groaned—he could not help it; for he knew that the schooner was not many hours out of sight of land.

There could be no help from there. They must defend themselves as well as they could, and, as a last resource, put to sea in the boats: they might reach another island, though the chances were small indeed. Still, he would rather be in the hands of the Ruler of the sea than in those of the fiends who pursued them—for they were little else, now that they were roused to the state of mania in which everything was forgotten but the one desire to kill.

The fresh comers rowed rapidly away, the boat being visible for some few minutes in the bright glow that seemed reflected from the sky on all sides; then the fugitives were alone, and, in a silence only broken by the dip of oars, the anxious party continued their journey.

"Pull hard!" exclaimed Mr. Wilton to those who were with him; and then he sent a shudder through all who heard him, by saying, "How do we know that there isn't a rising amongst my people at home?"

There was no response for a few moments, and then Mr. Ansdell replied, bitterly—

"Your people have not been driven to it by brutal treatment."

"Neither ought yours to have been," said Mr. Wilton, whose voice sounded laboured as he dragged at his oar. "I don't want to be hard on a man who's down; but look you here, friend Ansdell—before I'd have suffered my fellows to be served as yours have been, I'd have done the work myself."

"Now, look here!" broke in Jefferson with a savage snarl—"let's have no more of this. You live nigh to us, but you don't know everything. 'Still tongues make wise heads,' Master Wilton. Jest recklect that."

"Perhaps they do, Mr. Overseer; but, if we didn't know everything across the bay, we did know the game you were playing; and now that you have won your game, much good may it do you."

The boat's head grated on the sand, as the last words were spoken, when Wilton's son, one of the rowers, dashed off, closely followed by his father, to the house, half expecting to find that there was danger awaiting them; but all proved to be just as they had left it, though the women were agitated, and anxious to know the result of the journey across the water.

A sort of council of war was then held, as to the best plan to be adopted: whether to take to the sea, or try and fortify the house, holding out as best they could against the attack which, they felt sure, would come before long.

"First of all, though, some one should go down and see what is going on amongst your people," suggested Mr. Ansdell.

"Ah! to be sure. They must have seen the fires. Who'll go?" said Mr. Wilton.

A volunteer was soon found in the person of Soc, who dashed off at a sharp run, to return speedily with the news that not a soul was to be found.

"Looks as if somebody's else's niggers weren't perfection," sneered Jefferson.

"It's the old tale," said Wilton sternly. "If you set a light to dry wood, there's no knowing where the flame will end. We must get our place as strong as we can before morning; for by that time there won't be a slave in the island that has not joined in the rising."

It seemed almost an act of madness to think of trying to defend the place against the savage crew who would come on; but there were women here, too, and children; and as, totally ignoring the while the presence of Jefferson, John Wilton helped to barricade door and window, there was a stern reality of purpose to be seen marked in his countenance, which told that, when roused, he would be a very lion to beard in his den.

"Go you, and let the girls give you dry clothing, my little lassies," he said, kindly, to Lena and her maid. "And don't you be scared, even if you hear a little shooting; we'll take care of all of you.—Ans-dell," he said, as soon as they were alone, "this is going to be a sorry business. We must fight, man—fight to the last—for they'll tear us to pieces if they get the upper hand. We won't talk about who brought it on now; but will that Yankee fight?"

"I don't know—I can't say," was the reply.

And then for a few busy minutes the task of preparation went on, till there was a sound of coming footsteps, when all hastened to the barricaded door, ready to fire, if need were, though they felt pretty sure that they were friendly steps; since, had they been those of enemies, they would have approached with more caution.

CHAPTER XIV

"It's the Headleys," said Mr. Ansdell, as the figures of five people became visible.

And now these neighbours, who had heretofore been upon only civil terms, seemed to have become, by the common bond of danger that encircled them all, the dearest of friends.

Not that the new arrivals, who were hastily admitted, seemed at all likely to prove pleasant aids in the difficulty now threatening; for there were two women in the party—one of whom, a tall, hard, angular-looking lady, threw herself into a chair, and then, looking round through the dim room, exclaimed, in a harsh, strident voice—

"He would come!"

"And the wisest thing, too, under the circumstances, Mrs. Headley," said Wilton. "You would not have been very safe down below. You know the danger, I suppose?"

"Oh yes, I know," was the reply: "but he would come—come here, I mean, to the island—and leave as pleasant a little home as ever a man owned, to get into this wild, black, murdering place. Didn't I a'most go down on my knees to him, Sarah, and beg of him not to come?"

"No," said the lady addressed, very shortly—a young, tall, angular body, who stood gazing towards the barricaded door.

"That's right. Just like you," said the strident-voiced lady. "Take his part in everything. But it was so. I declare to goodness it was; and he would come. And now he'll get us all murdered in our

beds—I mean murdered, and that's just what he wants, so as to get rid of me."

"S'pose you just keeps your reowing till all this is about over, Mrs. Headley," interposed Jefferson. "I reckon we've 'nuff to do here without that. You can fight a few, for I've seen you; so just try if you can't handle a gun when the trouble comes."

Mrs. Headley did not condescend to answer, but turned away to speak to Wilton, who was, however, now in earnest converse with Mr. Ansdell.

"It must be done, I tell you, and it's the only way I can see. The first thing they will do will be to smash a hole through their bottoms, and that chance will be gone. You must cover us as well as you can, if they come up before we have done. Here, Tom—Joe!"

His two sons stepped forward in an instant.

"Look here, my lads," said the father. "We mean to hold the house as long as we can; but the time may come when we shall want to escape in the boats. So I propose that we swamp them both, and then a lump or two of rock in each will sink them in the shallows, where they may escape notice. When we want them, it will be easy enough to bale them out when we have removed the lumps of stone. Now, then, what do you say; will you come and help?"

"Of course," was the eager reply; when Mr. Wilton turned round to his neighbour with—

"I needn't have asked them, friend Ansdell; they'd go through fire and water to save that daughter of yours. It was Tom who first saw the fire, and roused me up to come and help. But keep a sharp look-out, and give us a word or two of warning, if you can. We must be smart, for it will be daylight directly."

"I reckon you'd better not venture out," said Jefferson.

"I reckon we had, sir," said Wilton sternly. "We're not asking you to risk your valuable carcass, are we? You will be safe enough here, and you can cover our retreat."

"Headley!" exclaimed the harsh, strident voice, "here—go too. Is your gun loaded?"

"My dear," said the husband mildly, "I'm going to stop and take care of you and Sarah. We are not at home now, my dear; and, besides, you are in danger."

"We shall not want Mr. Headley, ma'am," said Wilton, "only to protect us while we are busy; and if you do take a gun in hand, please mind which are friends and which are foes. Now, my boys," he said to his sons, "leave your guns, and let us be off, quick."

"Take my black with you," said Mr. Ansdell. "He will watch and give you warning of the danger, if it comes before you finish the task."

It was a good thought, and a few hurried words having enlightened Soc upon the duty he was expected to perform, one of the side windows was cautiously opened, and two of the party stood listening for a few moments.

The chirping of crickets, the soft sighing of the wind, and a dull, long, prolonged shuddering moan from some huge frog was all that could be heard; then came a louder sigh from the wind, as if Nature were about to awake from the slumbers of the night. There was a cool freshness in the air, and a crisp, bright look in the sky; but all was dark yet, though morning was near at hand, and at any minute they might ex-

pect, not the first faint dawnings and the following twilight, but a sudden flash of orange and gold in the zenith, and then the bright tropic sun leaping up to proclaim it was day.

The water was just visible, dim and mist-wreathed, not fifty paces from where they stood ; and all seemed so calm and peaceful that it was hard to imagine that there was danger so close at hand.

The black slipped out first, and in a moment his swarthy body seemed to be absorbed in the darkness, as he glided away towards the point whence the danger was expected.

Silence still. Nothing to betoken danger ; and father and sons were about to step through the window, when there was a short altercation.

“ We can do it very well without you ! ” said the elder lad stoutly.

“ Yes, of course, ” said the younger. “ You stop, father, and cover us. ”

But the old man sternly thrust them aside, and, stepping out, they followed him closely ; while those who watched could just dimly see three figures running down to the water, their footsteps muffled in the sand. Then there was a faint splash or two, and the surface of the bay, where a star or two had been reflected, looked blurred, as the light seemed to dance where the three men waded out, carrying with them the grapnels of the boats, and forcing them farther out, so as to ensure their not being laid bare at the going down of the tide.

Had those left behind been at their side, they would have seen them, each bearing a huge block of lava-like rock, as much as he could stagger under, till they had waded out to the boats ; and then they,

having deposited them on the frail planking, returned for others—masses that had been used for keeping the sand from washing up towards the garden of the house. These pieces placed with the others, it was an easy task, where they all three stood breast high in the calm water, to bear down a boat's side, when the sea rushed in to help, and in a few moments it filled and settled softly down.

But the watchers could see no more than the agitation of the water, as they scanned alternately the bay shores and the dark bank that seemed to shut in their vision landward.

CHAPTER XV

THE moments at such a time might well seem to be drawn out indefinitely, and it was with ever-increasing impatience that the party in the house watched for the return of these, their most stalwart protectors, when, as if by magic, there was the first faint flush in the sky, and objects around started out into sight: the tall, palm-like trees, the mountain glistening bright and clear, the surface of the bay, over which long ghost-like wreaths of mist seemed to be anxiously flitting; then the half-length figures of Wilton and his two sons forcing down the last boat; and, on the other hand, Soc, the black, running rapidly towards them in a stooping attitude, and, behind him some hundred paces, twenty or thirty of the slaves, who now burst forth with a wild and savage yell.

The yell was answered by a shriek of terror from the house, as it now seemed certain that the three men in the water must be cut off.

But, seeing their danger, these forced down the boat ; and then with the water splashing up around them in a silver-like foam, they made for the sands.

Theirs was the shortest distance to run, but they had these disadvantages : the water shallowed very gradually, and it was fearful work progressing through so dense a medium ; then they were quite unarmed ; and lastly, they had to make good their retreat through a narrow window, so that, unless those in the house could keep the blacks at bay, the fate of all there seemed to be sealed.

“ Run for it—quick, boys ! ” those in the house distinctly heard old Wilton exclaim, as they cleared the water and dashed up the sand, just as Soc made a bound, and literally threw himself through the window, rolling afterwards, panting, upon the floor.

The excitement in the house was now terrible, Mrs. Wilton standing in speechless terror with her daughters and Lena, feeling certain that there could be no escape ; for the subdued, patient slaves of the day before were now transformed into a set of maddened demons. They had evidently secured what spirits there had been in the warehouse, and with every extravagance of gesture, every frantic cry that human throat could utter, they came on.

It was now an even race to the house, and the disadvantage of the water was got over, when, as if dreading that their prey might escape, the blacks began to yell furiously ; and so reckless and daring was their onslaught, that those within the house were either unnerved, or else, in the excitement of watching the fleeing men, forgot to fire.

At one and the same moment, then, the Wiltons and three enemies reached the house, when, in those

supreme seconds, fraught with peril, a contest ensued between father and sons, each wishing the other to make good his retreat.

The delay was nearly fatal to all, for, with a savage shriek that seemed to bear with it the revenge for years of oppression, the slaves dashed forward.

"Go first, father, for Heaven's sake!" cried Tom Wilton imploringly.

"Confound you!—do as I tell you! Tom, Joe, get in!" raged the old man, as, with a tremendous blow with his fist, he sent the foremost black staggering back.

At the same moment, though, he received a heavy blow upon one arm from a club, which paralysed him, and the black who dealt it had raised his weapon to strike again, when, with a bound like that of a panther, Tom Wilton had him by the throat, and forced him backwards.

The next instant father and sons were struggling hard for life with the foremost of their enemies, others rapidly coming up. Their fate seemed sealed, and a wild wail burst from the women within, while Jefferson stood with presented rifle, yellow himself with dread, and afraid to fire.

As the rapid struggle went on close beneath the window, old Wilton went down, and another black leaped at him. Tom Wilton was nearly overpowered by a couple of assailants, and Joe was thrust back helpless against the window, when—crack! crack!—two rifle-shots rang out—two death-dealing flashes darted from within the house, and a couple of the blacks fell.

Two more shots followed, disabling others; and as

the enemy paused for a few moments, half-paralysed at the startling discharges, the opportunity was given to the Wiltons, the old man recovering himself, and reaching the window, through which he was half dragged by Headley and Mr. Ansdell, and half thrust by his sons.

And now once more there was a contention between the sons who should be last, the elder insisting that his brother should go; and again this delay nearly cost the brothers their lives, for the blacks, somewhat recovered from their check, made at them again, when Mrs. Headley snatched the rifle from Jefferson's nerveless hand, passed the barrel through the open window, and fired at the foremost black, the barrel almost touching his glistening body. The man leaped up a full yard, and fell back into the arms of him who was behind.

This diversion had the desired effect, but in another minute the attacking party were shouting and dancing frantically about the front on seeing the last of the Wiltons disappear through the window, which was directly afterwards barricaded hard and fast.

"It was a narrow escape, my lads," cried the father, holding out a hand to each; "but we are safe now, I hope, and thank Heaven for it. Mrs. Headley, I've always judged you harshly; but you're a true-hearted woman, and may Heaven bless you for saving my boy's life."

There were tears in the woman's eyes, as the father wrung her hands; but she would not show the softness of her nature, and exclaimed—

"I was obliged to fire—he wouldn't," and she pointed to her husband.

"Why, hadn't I just emptied my barrel?" he exclaimed, in an injured tone.

"There, there—never mind," cried Wilton, smiling; "we have something else to think of, for we shall have a good many barrels to empty, I'm afraid, before we shall be safe from these wretches."

"What are they all doing now?" asked Mr. Ansdell.

A look sufficed to show that they must have seen the efforts made by the Wiltons with respect to the boats, for about a dozen had rushed down into the water, searching about, and at the end of a minute or two, had dragged both high and dry upon the sands, where, with every demonstration of rage, they dashed out the thin planking, battering them with the pieces of rock that had been placed in as ballast.

"There's no escape for us that way," said Mr. Wilton grimly. "We shall have to fight it out here."

"Could we not escape to-night to the mountains?" said Mr. Ansdell.

"Yes, if we wished it; and be gradually hunted down, one by one," was the response. "No, neighbour Ansdell, we must hold this place to the last, for the women's sake. The worst danger we have to fear is fire; though, even then, there is the cave."

"The cave?" said Mr. Ansdell inquiringly.

"Yes, the cave which we use for a cellar. It is natural; and if it had not been for that I should have built farther from the water. If we make up our minds to show fight to the last, we can keep those scoundrels at bay for a week: and we must do so, in the hope of either tiring them out, or else being assisted from some quarter or other."

There was no reply to this, for there seemed so faint a possibility of help arriving, that the subject was to all present one that was unworthy of discussion.

The boats were no sooner demolished than, collecting together, and talking and gesticulating loudly, the slaves came on with a rush to attack the house, some armed with rough clubs, others with hoes, spades, anything they could turn into a weapon, only three or four seeming to possess firearms, and these were discharged at the window as they came on, the bullets splintering the shutter; but no harm resulted to the inmates.

Then began a fierce battery at the door and jalousie shutters; but the woodwork was, fortunately, strong, and for a few minutes resisted all efforts, while the men looked from one to the other as if asking counsel, when Mr. Ansdell spoke—with difficulty, though, making himself heard amidst the din that raged without.

“I am averse to bloodshed,” he said; “but we must fire on them.”

“Yes,” said Wilton sternly; “it is our only chance. Their blood be upon their own heads!”

For it was indeed time to take action, did they wish to save those in their care. There were a dozen heads at one of the open-barred shutters, through which flashing eyes and rolling opal eyeballs could be seen. The door, too, seemed about to yield, and a crashing sound behind the house told that the attack was being made there as well.

There had been a feeling of unwillingness to shed more blood, which had made all present try to hope that, finding the house strongly fastened, the enemy would retire, and grant them a respite; but they

owned that they had not known the savage nature that was now aroused in the negroes, infuriated with the thirst for revenge.

"It is of no avail; but I will try them once," said Mr. Wilton. "They have all my boys with them—they might, perhaps, hear me."

Leaving the room, then, they heard him open one of the upper windows, and bid the poor, deluded creatures, in his loud, firm voice, to give up, and go back to their huts. But his appearance was only the signal for a perfect storm of shrieks and cries; and the name of "Jeff"son—Jeff"son!" was heard, until the window was hurriedly closed, and the listeners in the lower room became aware, in the dim twilight caused by the closed shutters, that Mr. Wilton had returned.

"Shall I try, Wilton?" said Mr. Ansdell eagerly. "They may hear me."

"Go and try to stop the next hurricane," said Mr. Wilton bitterly. "You might as well speak to the sea!"

"But you won't listen to them—you won't give me up?" cried Jefferson pitifully. "They're mad—they'd tear me to pieces!"

"Give you up!" exclaimed Tom Wilton, with a look of contempt. "Do you think we are such curs as that? There, man, try and use that piece of yours, for we shall want it badly enough!"

As the young man spoke, his eyes lighted upon Lena Ansdell, a glance detected by the Yankee, who scowled at him ferociously, as he read the look of love and reverence aright.

"It is of no use to temporise: we must fight for the sake of those who look to us for protection,"

said Mr. Wilton. "Is every gun charged? Good! Then let every shot tell."

As he spoke, he opened the door of a side room, and signed to his wife and daughters to enter; but they clung to him so imploringly, that he was on the point of giving way, when Mrs. Headley completely turned the scale in their favour.

"Let them stop, man," she said. "It will encourage us to fight; and they can load for us, I dare say."

It was indeed time for action now; and without another word, Mr. Wilton stepped up to the shutter in greatest danger, and, firing in a slanting direction, two of the blacks fell back.

His two sons followed his example with a similar effect; but they only seemed to increase the rage of those without.

Mr. Ansdell was the next to fire, with Mr. Headley and his wife; their daughter of the gaunt bones and big frame loading for them busily.

Every shot told, but it was not until twenty or thirty had been fired that the rest of the party became aware of the fact that Jefferson was standing looking on, with his discharged piece in his hand. Upon seeing that he was noticed, he began to reload his rifle, and taking his post at the back window, he prepared to fire should an enemy present himself.

What slaughter they had committed, the occupants of the besieged house could not see, for as fast as an enemy fell, there were a dozen hands to drag him off; but it was evident that they were doing a great deal of execution, for every now and then there came from the grove about a hundred yards away bursts of shrieks and lamentations, which pointed out plainly enough that the women were there.

All at once Mr. Wilton ceased firing, and stood gazing through the opening that had so far served him as a loophole; and in a minute or two his sons, who had just reloaded their rifles, followed his example.

"Have you any powder?" said Mr. Ansdell just then, as he left his station. "Mr. Headley and I are quite out."

"We have a charge each left," was the reply from Tom Wilton; "and that we want to keep. But stop—isn't that your Cato?"

"Yes," said Mr. Ansdell. "I should hardly have thought, though, that he would have joined them."

"They would have murdered him if he had not," was the reply. "Look, there is Jefferson's other black bloodhound. We have him to thank for all this."

Fortunately for the party in the house, the slaves now drew back towards the wood, all but about a dozen, who had stationed themselves to watch that none escaped.

It was a welcome respite, for the heat was now growing intense; the closed windows preventing the sea-breeze from making their position more endurable. They had not tasted food either that morning; and now, waking to the consciousness of how much they could do to assist, by attending to the wants of those who were defending them, the women brought bread and water to first one and then another.

It fell to Lena's lot to offer the refreshments she held to the younger Wiltons, both of whom brightened up and smiled gratefully, the elder making some remark that brought the colour to her cheek, and a look of pain to her eye, as she turned hurriedly away.

CHAPTER XVI

THE day wore on, with a careful watch being kept; but though there were several false alarms, there was no fresh attack. There was the constant strain, however; and the knowledge that at any moment the slaves might make a dash down and succeed in forcing their way in, was always present to every member of the little party. It had been a hard struggle to keep it back, but the women had restrained all outward show of emotion, and patiently attended to those who defended them, but at last the strain during the long inaction became terrible to bear. There was the long night, too, fast coming on, when, instead of rest and sleep, they had to expect horrors, the thoughts of which made them shudder; and though none uttered the dread aloud, there was one enemy that troubled all, as they recalled the fate of the houses across the bay.

That fire would be brought to bear, no one entertained a doubt, and the rays sent in through the closed shutters by the declining sun were watched with dread, as they grew more and more horizontal, streaming like golden arrows from the quiver of death, as they struck against the opposite wall.

They were very silent there; those who were not engaged in watching, sitting and waiting patiently till their turn should come; but there was a saddened, depressed look on each countenance—a hopeless aspect that, while each tried to conceal it, became more and more manifest as the night drew on.

And now it seemed as if the night was advancing in rapid strides; the sun sank lower and lower, till

they saw its lower edge begin to dip in the sea, sending along the smooth surface a glowing way of molten gold, which rippled and danced, and grew each moment deeper in its gorgeous tints. Everywhere, too, the redundant tropic foliage assumed a tinge of gold upon its rich green, while the sky, purple almost in the far east, gradually changed from blue to green and opal, till it blushed a rich rose-red in the west.

On the other hand, where the trees cast long, dark shadows, and the evening breeze rippled through the tall cane plantations, all was so calm and tranquil that it seemed almost impossible to realise that savage enemies had been threatening them with death and destruction, and that even now they were in a position of imminent danger. Not a black figure was now to be seen, though there was a feeling upon those who watched that there were fierce eyes still fixed upon them from hiding-places all around.

Here and there, too, where the last rays of the sun fell, there were dark patches and stains, which told a horrible tale of the fatal effect of the firing: and then the sun passed below the horizon, and in a very few minutes it was night.

Hope seemed to die with those last rays of light, and the women cowered together, trembling, as they tried hard to drive back the thoughts that would oppress them—the thoughts of all those horrors of darkness, with their bloodthirsty enemies hovering around, ready at any moment to take advantage of the gloom to make their next attack.

One hour—two hours passed away, with the loud-ticking clock in the same room with them giving notice of the sluggish flight of the minutes, for those two hours were almost a life to some of the watchers.

Still there was no sign of an enemy, not a sound to announce the presence of a single black. At times some were ready to hope that the severe punishment the slaves had met with had frightened them away; but not one of the men entertained any such hope, and in whispers they talked of their future work.

"We must fire what shots we have left," said old Wilton sturdily, "and then club our guns or fight with the barrels; but stop a moment," he said, as a sudden thought struck him—"Jefferson has hardly fired to-day. What powder has he left?"

"Let's ask him," said Mr. Ansdell.

And then, in a whisper, the overseer's name was called and called again, but there was no response.

"If we only had a light," muttered Wilton, "if but for a moment;" though he knew that to use one, for however short a time, might prove fatal to some one or other of the little company.

"Who saw Mr. Jefferson last?" he asked.

"We all saw him just at sundown," said one of his sons. "He was standing then by the stair-foot."

The name was called again, a little louder, but still there was no reply; and then the elder son said, softly—"Let me search. I know every corner in the dark. Perhaps he is asleep."

It was a strange sensation that—standing there, in the utter darkness, listening while the young man glided about the large room, touching first one and then another, to ask the name in a subdued whisper. Now he would touch some article of furniture, or strike his hand against the wall; but soon they heard him moving in the next room, then in another and another, till the whole of the lower part of the

house had been well gone over, when father and son encountered by the foot of the stairs.

"He must have gone up, Tom," said the elder Wilton. "I'll go with you."

They stopped for a moment to listen and answer in the negative a whispered question from Mr. Ansdell, and then they stepped rapidly upstairs.

"Here is the answer, father!" exclaimed the younger, as a cool breath of air smote upon his cheek.

"What, Tom? Is he there?"

"The back window is open."

"A cowardly scoundrel!" exclaimed the elder passionately. "He brought this upon us, and now he has left us in the lurch!"

It was but too true; for as soon as the darkness had set in, Jefferson stole gently upstairs, as softly opened the back window, which looked over a large coffee plantation, and then, choosing to run the risk of being tracked by the blacks sooner than stay to encounter the dangers that he felt must befall them that night, he had dropped down, crept into the plantation, and then hurried silently away.

"It was like him," muttered the younger man, "and not his fault that they did not find the open window and take us by surprise. You don't think he would betray us, father?"

"Yes, I do," was the grim response; "but he will not now, for he dare not face them: they would tear him to pieces. No: he has gone to save his precious carcass, for he knows that the whole attention of the blacks will be taken up here, and that if he can reach the other side of the island, he may lie hidden for days."

The window was carefully secured, and then the

two men returned below, with the hopes raised by the belief that a few more charges of powder each would be afforded them completely damped.

John Wilton had hardly reached Mr. Ansdell's side, where he was watching by one of the windows, when the latter whispered—"My eyes are not so good as they were, Wilton. What is that down there by the sand? There, watch carefully, and you will see it pass that star shining in the water, and darken it. It did so just now, by that one to the left."

The old planter leaned his forehead against the bars, and by degrees he made out, at last, a dozen stealthy figures crawling along close to the water's edge, as if they were trying to get round to the back.

He raised his gun, took aim, and then paused; took aim again, and again paused.

Should he do it or no? It would be one enemy the less, and would serve to show the foe that they were watchful.

He hesitated no longer, but took careful aim, and as soon as he felt sure that he had well covered the shadowy form that was nearest, he fired.

CHAPTER XVII

As the loud, smart report of the rifle rang out, there arose a horrible shriek—one which seemed to curdle the very blood of those who listened. Then there was a rush of feet, in dull, soft-sounding footsteps, and, once more, all was silent as the grave.

"That has, perhaps, warded off some scheme of theirs for the present," said old Wilton, as his hand mechanically took hold of his powder-flask.

But the next moment he replaced it with a sigh, and stood, holding the piece with both hands on the muzzle, while upon them he rested his chin.

Another hour passed away, and then the watchful eyes of the younger of the brothers detected a similar advance towards the other side, when another piece fired its last shot, and the enemy was put to flight.

And now a whispered proposition arose from Headley, the owner of the little plantation at the head of the bay, that now, under cover of the darkness, they should make good their retreat to the other side of the island.

"We might hide from them there for days," he said.

"No!" was Wilton's decisive answer. "The chances are ten to one against our getting off clear, for they are all on the look-out, you may depend. We are under cover here, and have a little provision; out in the open we shall be at their mercy."

"But this watching in the dark is such killing work," protested Headley.

"For them—so far," was the grim reply. "No, neighbour, we must fight it out here, and—look out! Who has a gun—loaded?"

The hurried exclamation was drawn from Wilton by a sudden flash, seen at some distance amongst the trees; and he knew now well enough that the danger he had so long foreseen was about to put them to the test.

"Tom, Joe, my lads, it's a hard task to set you," said their father; "they will try to fire us by throwing brands on the roof. You two must get up there, ready to dash them off. They have a gun or two,

but I don't think you need fear them, and that is the only way they could reach you."

For the peril was now imminent indeed; the flash of one light being rapidly multiplied, as brand after brand of some dry inflammable wood was ignited; and, in the distance, as the dancing lights fell upon the black figures running here and there amongst the trees, the effect was horrible.

A rush was evidently intended; and a shiver ran through more than one frame, as the fulness of the appalling danger began to be perceived. For the house was principally of wood, and from the dryness of the climate, that wood was light and ready to catch at once, when it seemed that nothing could save the building and those within it from destruction.

The great danger, though, was to be apprehended from the roof, upon whose low pitch any brand, if thrown, would lodge; and the covering being light slabs or shingles split from pine, unless the young men who had boldly climbed to their places could succeed in hurling back the fiery missiles, the fate of all within the place was sealed.

"Who has a shot left?" said Wilton, to whom all seemed to look as leader. Three responded, namely, Mr. Ansdell, Headley, and his wife.

"I don't want to assume too much, friends," said the old man quietly; "but I should be glad to have those three rifles handed to me one after the other."

Without a moment's hesitation Mr. Ansdell passed his piece into the other's hands, and then stood watching the coming on of the blacks, who, now casting off all concealment, came rushing on, burning wood in hand, to the number of thirty or so, the fire they

carried flashing and blazing fiercely in the air as they ran, while the bright glow was cast behind on dozens of eager black faces.

As if by pre-arrangement, they all stopped at about thirty paces from the house, when, leaping forward, one man ran on, whirled his firebrand round his head, and was in the act of throwing it, when—

Crack!

The nerve had departed from that arm, and in a moment the blazing wood fell to the ground, lighting up the ghastly, grinning features of him who had held it the moment before, as he fell upon one knee and then rolled over, dead.

Nothing dismayed, another man dashed on, and with a more rapid movement he swung his torch round; but before it could leave his hand—

Crack!

The fatal rifle-shot rang out, and the black turned half round to flee, but fell the next moment upon his firebrand, and extinguished it on the instant.

Again a man leaped out, yelling furiously, as if to intimidate those he strove to harm. He, too, whirled his torch around his head, lighting up his hideously fierce aspect, his grinning teeth, rolling eyes, and distorted face; for it was evident that they had all been preparing themselves for the onslaught with the spirit they had secured from the warehouse.

It was an appalling sight; and this time John Wilton's hand trembled as he took aim. It was the last shot too; and he had hoped that the others would have had the effect of checking the attack, instead of, as it seemed, inciting the enemy to fresh attempts.

The torch was in full blaze now, and the occupants

of the doomed house could plainly hear the fluttering noise of the flame as it was flashed about to make it a more dangerous missile ; but again, before it could be hurled, the deadly rifle poured forth its contents, and, as if dashed down, the black fell upon the instant, still holding tightly to his torch, which burned upon the ground sufficiently brightly to reveal to those around the writhings of his body, and horrible contortions of his face, before he lay immovable.

“ Heaven help and protect my poor boys ! ” moaned John Wilton, when, as with a savage shout, the whole party of blacks dashed forward, the flames playing upon their fierce faces, and each torch making its own peculiar fluttering roar. The end seemed to be at hand, for the last grain of powder had been fired, and no attempt had been made by the besieged to withstand the attack outside.

Had the slaves calmly applied their torches in one or two places, and been supported by others to beat down resistance, the house must have been in a few minutes blazing furiously. As it was, though, the lesson taught by the three fatal shots fired by John Wilton had had its effect ; and to a man the attacking party contented itself with hurling the blazing wood they carried against the shutters or upon the roof, from which, with a celerity that was almost marvellous, the torches were thrown back upon the sand.

Each man, as he hurled his brand, darted back, so that the whole attack did not last above a minute, at the end of which time the result was that a torch was burning feebly here, another there, half extinguished upon the sand ; while, as to the house, save a little charring here and there, it was intact.

By slow degrees, first one and then another brand

became extinct to the last spark ; and then once more fell upon the scene of what a few minutes before was all light, life, and glancing figures, a dead silence that was almost appalling to the women, though to the men it came like a reprieve, for they knew that for some little while they would be free from attack.

The next minute the two Wiltons climbed down from the roof, back through one of the upper windows, and retook their places in the lower room.

"It was well done, lads," said the elder. "Could you see any fire farther on in the wood?"

"Not a spark."

"Then they'll give us a rest for the remainder of the night."

"Unless they go and set fire to Headley's place," said one of the sons.

"It won't be well for them if they do," said Mrs. Headley, in her harsh, coarse tones. "There's powder enough to blow half of them away."

There was a sound heard at that moment as of a hand brought sharply down upon a thigh.

"And we never to think of that!" exclaimed Headley. "So there is: two big canisters in the long cupboard, where we put it when that Harris brought it across to us in the schooner's boat."

"How much is there?" exclaimed the elder Wilton, hoarse with excitement.

"About two dozen pounds," was the reply; "but there is no getting at it."

"We *must* have it," said old Wilton sturdily. "It must be got, or some of us will die in the attempt."

CHAPTER XVIII

It was agreed on all hands that it would be absolute madness to attempt to go through the wood or round by the bay to the house in search of the powder. It was also now too near morning for the attempt to be made; for the night had slowly worn on in the midst of the excitement, and there was now a possibility that, after their severe reverses, and the failure of their attempt to burn the house, the negroes would hold aloof till the morning, perhaps till the next night; and to some extent this proved to be the case, for another hour glided by, and then, as all was still peaceful without, old Wilton said he should advise those who were not on the watch to try and sleep.

But sleep was not to be the welcome guest of any one that night. And when at last the morning broke, it was to creep sluggishly in, and illumine face after face, ghastly and pallid with the horrors of the past.

It seemed almost a mockery to their misery for the sun to rise so glorious and bright—for Nature to look so calmly serene and lovely. There were the tiny waves of the beautiful landlocked bay, glistening like a sea of opal; the tall palms rose, column-like, to spread their plummy fronds against the clear, deep-blue sky; the green canes waved, and bright-hued birds flitted from bush to bush, whistling and screaming. All was bright and beautiful; but man made the Eden-like island for the time being a home of horror.

There was a ray of hope, though, in the breasts of the defenders of the house. They had beaten off the

attacking party, and foiled their attempt to fire the place. They must be disheartened by their failure—perhaps suffering from the effects of a drunken orgie. Certainly, the defenders were without a grain of powder; but the enemy were ignorant of that fact, and their last advance had been repulsed most satisfactorily. They might perhaps hesitate to attack again; and possibly, by some daring plan, the powder might be obtained from Headley's house.

The day wore slowly away, without alarm—there was not so much as an inimical face seen. The island might have been deserted, for the quiet that reigned on their side; but they could not but think of the silence as ominous.

They looked out to sea, hour after hour, from the upper windows, in the hope that by some chance a vessel might come in sight; but their watch was in vain; and once more evening drew nigh, with the darkness of another terrible night threatening, during which time it was an understood thing that one of the Wiltons was to undertake the dangerous mission of trying to fetch away the powder from the house at the head of the bay.

Night at last, bringing with it both silence and darkness the most profound; and it was with a shudder of horror that the inmates of the house prepared for what seemed now inevitable death. In a quiet, simple way Mr. Wilton asked all present to join him in prayer; and soon his earnest, heartfelt words were breaking the silence, as he put up his appeal for help in this sore strait.

Then, once more, as his last word died away, there fell that terrible silence which closed all in, like some fearful, almost palpable mist. Now and again there

was a half-suppressed sob from some woman, and a few muttered words of comfort. But soon these ceased, and for quite an hour there was the awful stillness that seemed to presage the coming of some storm.

Suddenly all present started as, in a whisper that at that time seemed painfully loud, Tom Wilton said, "I think I'll venture now, father."

"No—no, Tom! Don't risk it, my boy!" cried Mrs. Wilton.

"Hush!" said her husband. "Why should you stay him, when it is to save, perhaps, the lives of all of us?"

There was a low sob or two, and Sarah Headley softly crept to where the young man was standing, held out her hand, till, in the darkness, she caught hold of his; and then, pressing it between both of hers, she whispered, "Try and say one kind word to me before you go, Tom Wilton."

The young man started. "What can I say?" he replied gently. "But there, I must go. Help take care of all here—I may never come back!"

The tall, masculine woman shivered, as the young man's hand was withdrawn, and sinking upon the floor, quite in a heap, she covered her face with her hands, and wept; for there was none there to see the suffering that shook her frame.

She would have wept more bitterly, and those tears would have been mingled with others that told of hot, burning jealousy, could she have seen that Tom Wilton had made his way to where stood his mother and sister, to whom he whispered a few words of hope and encouragement, before finding where Lena Ausdell was seated. The next moment he was by her side.

"I have come to say good-bye, Miss Ansdell," he whispered.

And then, as if the words but lately uttered in his ear had impressed him so that he was bound to speak them again, he repeated poor, plain, coarse Sarah Headley's appeal—"Try and say one kind word to me before I go; I may never return."

Lena was too much startled and agitated—too much taken by surprise, to speak for a few moments. She knew that she ought to say a few kind, gentle words to the brave fellow who was about to risk his life for their sake; but this manifestation of a warmer feeling than interest troubled her so that her reply was confused and unintelligible. The next moment she felt a pair of lips pressed upon her hand, and then she was trembling and alone.

"I am afraid it is too much of a risk," was the next she heard, and the voice was her father's. "How shall you go? Through the wood?"

"No, I shall swim," was the laconic reply.

There was no more said; and, in a few moments, a faint, rustling noise, followed by a dull thud, told that the young man had lowered himself from one of the upper windows, and had commenced his perilous journey.

Again the faint rustling for an instant, and then the dead silence once more; while those at the windows watched anxiously the surface of the bay, to see if they could make out any sign of disturbance.

Twice a star-gleam seemed to be blurred, but they could not be sure, the surface was so cloudy and mist-hung. There was not even the faintest plash

or ripple to give them warning that their messenger in search of hope was swimming away; "but," as Mr. Wilton said, "it was a good sign, for their enemies would not know of the attempt."

They knew how the time went; for, in spite of its startling noise, as each hour rolled by, they had not the heart to stop the old timepiece upon the wall. And now they counted one, two, three, four hours of this awful suspense, without a sign of the return of Tom Wilton, or of the slaves being alarmed.

Two or three times over a faint sound from the wood or from the plantation on the left made every heart leap, for it seemed like a signal for a fresh attack. But the night wore on, still in silence; and, in despair, all saw the day break with the result that they had yet, perhaps, a few hours' respite; but there was no powder, and he who had so boldly taken upon himself the task of obtaining it had not yet returned.

Evening again, after a day of heat, and thirst, and misery, such as the sufferers would at another time have believed themselves unable to support; but one had unselfishly tried to comfort another, as the hours rolled sluggishly by.

Old Wilton was watching, with weary, aching eyes, the wood, the plantation, and the surface of the bay, when his second son touched him on the shoulder.

"I shall go and try my luck, father, as soon as it is dark."

Old Wilton shook his head sadly.

"I will not venture too far," said his son; "and, if I find it doubtful, I will return. Tom will turn up again some time or other."

The father merely shook his head again; and, without further announcing his intentions, about ten the young man glided out by the same way as his brother had taken his departure, and once more came the hours of watchfulness.

This time, though, the night was not passed without incident; for about an hour before dawn there was a faintly-heard signal, and, upon the upper window being opened, there was the sound of one climbing up, and a few minutes after all stood together in the lower room.

"What news? Have you the powder?" exclaimed old Wilton.

"No," was the whispered answer. "I could never get near."

"But did you see anything of Joe?"

"Of Joe! What do you mean? Where is he, then? Not——"

"Yes —yes. He has gone in search of you!"

The young man groaned.

"He will never get back. I have had the narrowest of escapes myself. It was easy enough to swim down to the head; but the current gets so strong, you cannot face it back. I had to lie in the cane-brake all day, for they are in the house, and there is no chance of getting near; and though we cannot see them, they are all lying in wait, as watchful as so many cats, and they chased me half across the island, only I doubled back."

"But we heard nothing."

"No; they are as silent as can be, and you don't know there's any danger near till you come upon one of them hidden amongst the canes. But I must go and see if I can't warn poor Joe."

"No—no!" cried his mother. "It would be utter madness. Stay and protect us, Tom. I cannot lose you both."

Another weary night; another weary day, and night again, with no change—no return of the younger brother. The elder had told them of how he had swum out to be beyond hearing, and then made his way towards the head of the bay; but his words were ominous, when he told of the watchfulness of the blacks, who, apparently tired of risking their lives by direct attack, were, in ignorance of the want of ammunition, waiting either to starve the whites out, or else planning some scheme by which they could take them by surprise.

"Do you think Joe would be caught?" said the father, at last, to his son.

"No; I fancy he would take to the woods; and Joe is as clever that way as the blacks themselves. I wouldn't be down-hearted: he may turn up yet. Hark! What's that?"

CHAPTER XIX

TOM WILTON's exclamation was caused by a sudden glare of light at one end of the house, and on darting to a window which gave him a view of the part in question, he was in time to see a swarthy figure creeping rapidly away, and he knew that they had been taken by surprise.

For while they had been, perhaps from utter weariness, somewhat lax in their vigilance, the blacks had cunningly crept up, one at a time, and laid light combustible cane leaves and stems against the

house-end, till, deeming it enough, one of the boldest had undertaken, and most successfully, to fire the heap; and, as Tom Wilton uttered his alarm, the flames darted up sharply, with a wild crackling roar, and simultaneously there arose a yell of triumph from all around, where, dimly seen against the dark bank formed by the reflection upon the gloom, were numberless leaping and dancing figures, running about wild with excitement.

Without a moment's hesitation, father and son dashed open the window, and leaping out, began to scatter the light flaming material, amidst the yells of the blacks, who, however, never came a step nearer.

The effort, though, was vain; for the night breeze blowing briskly, the flames were fanned till they roared, and the light woodwork of the house caught directly, the flames running up it to the roof, which began to blaze in a way that showed how useless would be any effort to save the place.

For a few moments the two men stood silent and as if stricken helpless, their hands scorched, their hair singed, and despair at their hearts; for, amidst the roaring of the cruel flames, and the yelling of the slaves, who shrieked with delight at the success of their ruse, now arose the wailing of the women, as the smoke began to roll slowly into the room where they were assembled.

Then with a hoarse cry of bitter rage and despair, John Wilton turned towards the howling wretches in his front, shook his fist at them in his impotent rage, and the next moment, unarmed as he was, he would have rushed upon them.

His son, though, was aware of his purpose, and

catching him in his arms, for a few moments the two men struggled together, the blacks yelling more furiously than ever.

"For the sake of those inside, father," cried Tom Wilton, as he panted with his efforts to restrain the elder, whose muscles were hardened by a life of toil, till they were like so much iron.

The words were talismanic, and the next moment, having to plunge through flame and smoke to reach it, father and son leaped through the window once more, and stood amidst the dense choking vapour in one of the outer rooms.

Wilton's house was strongly though roughly built: the father had come out without a penny to retrieve his fortunes, and for long enough he had cultivated his own plantation, with the help of his sons, till, by degrees, fortune smiled on him, and he did as the others upon the little island—obtained slave aid. Then the hut he had lived in was exchanged for his present house—a square frame-built house, which, with the help of his sons, he had enclosed upon a rocky ridge close to the sandy shore. It had been the toil of years, the building of that home, with the different additions that had been made, one and all of wood; but it now seemed as though its destruction was to be the work of an hour.

Tom Wilton's first act was to rush upstairs and close the door of the room whose end was on fire, while his father did the same by the lower room. This would keep out the stifling smoke a little, but already it was creeping fast towards the centre of the house; and in addition to the roar of the flames and the mad yelling of the blacks, there now came that loud, spluttering, crackling noise of the burning

wood, as plank after plank, timber after timber, rapidly caught fire, the sparks and burning fragments streaming away overhead into the darkness like a storm of golden snow.

A glance or two from the windows showed that there was no escape ; for the blacks, emboldened once more by success, were coming nearer and brandishing their weapons, as they surrounded the place, ready to drive back any of the hapless ones who might try to rush from the burning pile.

The darkness around seemed to be one huge, black dome, illumined by the rushing flames, which each moment leaped up brighter and brighter. The yells and shrieks were sufficient to startle the stoutest heart from its equanimity ; but those two men, father and son, toiled on.

The question seemed to be revolving itself as to how long they could exist in this stifling vapour, crawling in through every crevice : the opening, though, of a window gave them a supply of air, and then the back-room was sought, it being farthest from the angle that had been fired, and after that they had a large kitchen beyond, which would afford them a few minutes' respite from the merciless flames.

As for the windows, there was no need to watch by them now : for though the slaves had closed in, they still kept at some distance from the house.

Up one slope of the roof the flames now rushed, licking up, as it were, with their forked tongues, the light shingles, which crackled and flared away like squares of stout paper ; and on high there was a very vortex of ruddy gold and orange flame around one

chimney, the blaze seeming to have obtained the mastery over the smoke, which rolled away in faint wreaths of vapour. Across the bay, too, now in a ruddy stain, which spread like a stream of blood upon the shimmering waters, the fire shone brightly; tall cocoa palms stood up like columns of gold; while round and round, and ever uttering strange cries, the scared birds, attracted by the novel light, flitted and flitted, until, overpowered by the potent gas that arose from the burning pile, they fell headlong, stupefied, to their death.

Louder and louder each moment the rush of the flames, and their peculiar fluttering noise, as they leaped, and played, and licked at each rafter and beam, as if tasting and tormenting the stout wood, which anon seemed to curl, and curve, and bend, here and there, with agony, before it became an incandescent mass of charcoal.

The inner portion of the house was now blazing furiously at one end; and the slaves yelled with triumph as they gazed at the glowing interior, through brightly-illuminated windows, upon the immolation of the household gods.

But still there was no shriek for mercy—no appeal for aid; there was but the wild crackle and roar of the furnace, as the flames grew each moment more fierce, and seemed to rejoice in purple, in blue, in scarlet, and orange, in every brilliant tint, fanned as they were by the sea-breeze; and now and then, too, a rafter fell with a crash, to send up, careering as in a whirlwind, a spiral of golden sparks, to join those ever rushing over the waving canes.

Sometimes, in their excitement, a black or two would rush in and hurl a club, or a rough stave of

some hog'shead, into the flames, running back then to squat down watchfully, ready to spring at either of the victims who should try to escape ; while when once the flames, darting into the room at the back, displayed for a moment a dark, moving figure or two, the fiendish joy of the slaves was loud and exultant, as they danced and shouted, and beat together the rough weapons they held.

Several times over they made a general rush to the front or back, as if anticipating that the inmates were about to make an effort to escape ; but no attempt was made, and in a sort of triumphant dance they lessened the radius of the cordon drawn round the burning building, as now in rapid leaps the fire spread on, room after room catching, till the whole place was in a blaze, which, like the fires of a few nights before, lit up the heavens with a glow that was visible for miles.

CHAPTER XX

THOSE were supreme moments of peril for the occupants of the boats of the *Volage*, as the schooner glided down beneath the waves. For the first few moments, as the stern rose, the painter of the foremost boat was tightened, and her bows lifted, so that for a while she was in imminent danger of being swamped ; but, in another minute, as the schooner began to sink, the rope's tension was at a more acute angle with the water, then it was horizontal, then the stress was downward, and lastly, to the horror of the crew, the bows grew lower, and as the schooner plunged down

towards the chasm opening to receive her, the boats made a rush forward, and the men rose to leap overboard and swim for their lives, when, with a shout to them to stand aside, Harris plunged his way over them, jack-knife in hand, seized the rope, and, with one tremendous cut, divided the strands.

"Starn all, you lubbers!" he shouted.

"Quick, my lads—quick! every oar out, and stern all!" cried Brand.

Fortunately, a couple of oars were already out in each boat, and these were frantically applied by two men to each; others rapidly followed, and though no way seemed to be given in a backward direction to the boat, her progress down the watery slope was for a few moments checked, while they hung, as it were, upon the very edge of a fearful whirlpool—a dreadful vortex, which sucked at the boats, and formed in fierce eddies and pools, each of which seemed to be fighting for its share of loose corks and deck gear, which kept disappearing and then leaping out again to the surface, as if endued with sentient feeling, and fighting against the deadly embraces of the whirl that tried to suck them down into the awful depths below.

Twice over it seemed as if their last hour had come, as the boats were drawn nearer and nearer to the agitated pool where the schooner had gone down.

The failure of an oar would have been fatal, but in the horror of their situation, just at the last moment, as they were sweeping down into what looked to be a well carven out of the water, a mighty effort, made by all the men in unison,

literally wrenched the boat aside, and at this instant the men in the other boat, rowing hard, began to make their strength felt upon the line which attached them together.

Another tug made the boat seem stationary for a few moments ; another, with the towing of the second boat, moved her ; and now, giving way with all their might, the men literally dragged themselves back from the horrible death that had so nearly been their lot, and at the end of five minutes their boats rocked softly on the swell, as they lay there in the midst of the ocean, with only a spar here, and a cask or grating there, to show where the gay little *Volage* had so lately glided over the waves.

For a few minutes not a word was spoken : so great had been the shock, that the men sat wiping their dripping foreheads, each face wearing still something of the horrified expression which it had assumed on the near approach of death.

Then they all started, and directly after a broad grin overspread their features, as the incongruous Harris burst forth with ---“ I reckon, as old Caterpillar would say, that that was uncommon nigh. Bit of advice : allus have a haxe in the bows of your boat. I reckon that there other warn’t bad advice neither —starn all.”

Nothing more was said then, however, for the men caught sight of the dejected face of their captain as he knelt in the bows gazing at the spot where his little vessel had gone down.

One of the most discontented began to mutter something, but he was checked by Harris, who, in a hoarse whisper, told him to “Stow that ! Didn’t he see as the skipper was takin’ on about his ship ?”

But George Brand's thoughts were not only with the sunken vessel, for he was once more going over in his own mind the circumstances in connection with her loss; and, though he could not blame himself for his precipitate departure, it was all plain enough now that he had been playing into his rival's hands.

What, then, was to be done?

That was a question difficult to answer at a time when he had no one with whom he could take counsel.

Go back, his heart said, and face the scoundrel at whose instigation the ship had been scuttled.

But how could he prove that?

He knew that there was no proof. Still, he was determined upon facing Jefferson; and he was not without hope that some means of discovering the men who had been his tools might turn up.

Then his thoughts turned upon their position. There was land at no very great distance to the west; one or two small islands that they could reach. The place of their departure was eight times as far, and he foresaw that there might be some difficulty amongst the men.

He was quite right, for as soon as he gave his orders for putting the boats' heads about, Johnson immediately spoke up—

"That arn't the way we ought to go, cap'en."

"What do you mean?" exclaimed Brand hastily.

"That's going back eight times as far as we ought to go. Let's make for Wayley's Key."

"Ay, let's make for Wayley's Key!" cried several in the other boat.

"You seem to forget, my lads, that I'm captain

still, even if the schooner has gone down. I say that we will return to Plantation Island; so now, out with your oars, and, after a bit, we'll rig up a sail or two. You, Richard Lee, take command of that boat till I put Harris aboard. Harris, see what you can do in the shape of a lug-sail."

"Ay, ay, sir," was the answer from both the men addressed.

But Johnson and the others in his boat pulled in their oars, and refused, point blank, to go on.

"Bit of advice for you, my lads," said Harris—"out with your oars, and pull on."

"Bit of advice for you in that boat," shouted Johnson back again—"pitch that canting old humbug overboard, and follow us."

He stopped short, for his old adversary, Richard Lee, had suddenly seized him by the throat and waist, and by sheer strength, sent him back over the boat's gunwale.

"Will you do your duty, or am I to pitch you overboard?" exclaimed Lee fiercely.

"Will you see one who speaks for your good treated like this?" shouted Johnson, appealing to those around, when half the men rose, murmuring, attacked Richard Lee in turn, and, overpowered by numbers, he was, after a gallant struggle, during which the boat swayed from side to side till she was in danger of swamping, forced over the side, where he disappeared, half stunned by a blow he had received.

The next minute, though, he was dragged on board of the skipper's boat, where Brand stood, pale with rage and mortification at being withstood by his own men at such a time, when the anxiety to get

back to the island was almost more than he could bear.

"Never mind, cap'en," said Harris aloud. "Here's my advice—leave 'em alone, and they'll soon be glad enough to foller us."

"What do you mean?" cried Brand, who snatched hopefully at the old sailor's words.

"Oh, nothin' much, cap'en—only they've got plenty of grub, but we've got some, and all the water."

The night came on dark, but clear and starlight; the watch was arranged, and those who were unoccupied lay down amidst the thwarts, glad to sleep off the fatigue of the last hours of heavy labour. For there seemed to be nothing to fear: there was a long, tedious boat-journey before them; but the weather was settled and fine; it was not the season for hurricane or storm. All they had, then, to do was to take their spell at the oars; their sail would do the rest.

Sailors are not only proverbially, but really a very easy-going class of men—familiarity with danger has bred in them contempt; and as soon as some great peril is at an end, they are ready to sleep, or to feast, troubling themselves but little respecting the future.

CHAPTER XXI

THERE was little else to be heard at the end of an hour, as George Brand half sat, half lay back by the side of old Harris, who had hold of the tiller, but the heavy breathing of the sleepers, who, aware that it was the turn of some one else to watch, were

quite satisfied to leave the task to them. The breeze played well in the sail, and the little boat leaped over wave after wave as the water foamed under the bows, a glance or two at this or that star affording the means of steering sufficiently correct for the night.

Very little was said, for George Brand was deep in thought; but from time to time the old sailor turned his head, and gave a running commentary upon the proceedings of the other boat.

"If you'll take a bit of advice, sir, you'll just shove your toe a little nigher to Dick Lee's ribs, so as to let him have it on the shortest notice. Don't be afraid when you do give it him, for he's a mighty strong sleeper; he's like that Irish chap—he pays attention to it. But I'd draw back smart afterwards, 'cause he might hit out savage."

Then there was a short pause.

"They're trying it on now, sir, on the quiet. They're running a bit nigher to the wind, and you'll see every time they tack if they don't reach on a bit, till they've got it so as they can lay us aboard whenever they like."

As the time wore on, it seemed to be precisely as the old sailor had predicted; for there was constantly to be seen the white, ghostly sail of the boat looming nearer and nearer, like some vengeful pursuing spectre.

Then it seemed to fade away into the far distance, and, in spite of his anxiety, the wakefulness of the past nights had to be accounted for, and nature pressed heavily upon the young captain's eyelids.

He rose, shook himself, bathed his eyes with water, plunged into conversation with the old sailor, and

then listened to his remarks upon the boat; but all was of no avail. In a moment he was back at Plantation Island, trying to rescue Lena Ansdell from some peril. Then he was struggling with Jefferson, who had tried to bear her away again: always something startling; and then, in a terrified, gasping way, he would be sitting up again, listening to the muttered "burr—burr—burr" of old Harris's conversation.

"I wouldn't lay my neck back upon the gunwale, sir, if I was you. It never agrees with me. See there, now, how they are a-reaching over. They're getting the better of us now, and no mistake!"

Lena again, and in trouble, and the schooner sailing back into the bay, to her rescue from the overseer. They were to be married that day, and the schooner would not sail on fast enough to stop the wedding, on account of that hole in her bows. Yes, there seemed to be a great hole, which kept growing larger and larger. He could hear the water rushing in faster and faster, so that it must swamp them; and Jefferson would carry her off in triumph.

"That's a near tack, that is, sir."

Awake! back again to the present, with the other boat only some fifty yards away, and just dimly seen as she reached off into the obscurity. Farther away—farther still each moment, fading away even as did the night scene and the dimly descried sleeping figures—fading away, that boat was, into the schooner once more, sailing on and on, past banks green with glorious vegetation and bright with clustering flowers. Lena was by his side now, and there was nothing to fear; only that snake, which swayed about from the great tree that overhung the bank, brushed the schooner's sails, and seemed ready to fall upon them.

That snake must be dangerous, for it had so strange a look; its eyes were such as he had seen before; and that cruel mouth—yes, that was Jefferson's, and it was about to strike. But he could not move, he could not stir, though the monster's icy-cold breath was upon his face. Nearer—nearer—nearer, and he could not cry out; he could not even strike at it. And now it was speaking to him quite plainly, this hideous swaying beast, which kept up with the schooner as she swept along with flowing sail, and the water foaming under her bows. Yes, it was speaking plainly enough; and yet, how could that be? It must be Jefferson, and yet—

“I'd just give Dick Lee your toe now, sir.”

Awake! and— Yes, what nonsense! He did not think he had been asleep, and yet he must have been.

So he thought; but he did not move, and Harris repeated his whisper.

“You're a bit overcome, sir; but rouse up now, and give Dick Lee your toe. Tell him, as soon as he's awake, to rouse up the others, quiet like. My advice is, as we give these chaps in t'other boat a sharp rap on the knuckles, as shall stop 'em from trying it on again.”

“Do you think they mean mischief?” said Brand, in the same low tone.

“This tack or next, sir; but rouse up Dick Lee.”

Cautiously leaning forward, Brand woke up Lee and the rest of the men, telling them to be prepared with their oars as weapons to keep off the other boat's crew; but not to move—not to show signs of preparation until the others were close aboard.

This task done, Brand returned quietly to the stern, where, tiller in one hand, the sheet of the sail in the

other, the old sailor sat, as calm as if there was no exciting attack about to be made.

"I shall let 'em come close up, and then throw her off quite sudden before the wind; and that'll give our chaps time to drop them oar-blades a few chops on some of the lubbers' heads. Give 'em a bit of advice, not to chop too hard, 'cos it might make 'em sore—I mean in'ards like; and if that there Johnson and the half-breed was gone, there's some tidy seamen among 'em. But Lor' bless my heart, Master Brand, what a mistake it is to fly in the face of natur' and try to make a man half a black and half a white! Just look at that chap of ours—there's a specimen of what you get—he arn't clever enough for a white, nor he arn't stupid and clumsy enough for a black. He's all hugamabuff, as we used to call it, neither one thing nor the other. I wonder, though, whether he's going to help 'em? I should say not. He arn't very fond of hard knocks."

Brand did not reply, for he was screening his eyes with his hand, and watching the boat, that had now become so distant as to be barely discernible.

But before long it tacked; and now, plainly enough, Brand could see that the object of the helmsman was to lay her side by side with their own, and but for the design being suspected, the plan must have succeeded.

"They're a-coming this time, sir—safe," said Harris softly. "No, not this time. Take it coolly—another tack will do it."

And so it proved, for after the next tack it was plain that a right calculation had been made.

"Don't be excited, sir. Take it coolly," whispered Harris. "I'd take the boat-hook if I was you: and

if I could hitch it into Master Johnson anywheres, I'd have him overboard, and bring him here, bless him! A couple o' days lashed hand and foot in the bows wouldn't do him no harm."

Another minute and the other boat was close alongside, with her crew ready to grapple; but, by a clever manœuvre with the tiller, Harris completely balked the plan, the crew of his own boat contriving, evidently with great satisfaction to themselves, to administer a few smart blows with their oars.

The next minute they were far ahead, and listening to the disappointed curses of those whose plan had so signally failed.

CHAPTER XXII

HUNGER is said to tame a lion; thirst certainly tamed the wilful spirits in the other boat; and at the end of the next evening those on board were glad enough to petition for a little water; and on the boat being allowed to come sufficiently near for each man to take his portion, the captain smiled grimly as he saw that, by way of a peace-offering, the men had bound Johnson, who was lying in the bows of their boat.

"You'll take him off, and put Dick Lee aboard, won't you, sir?" said one of the men humbly.

"No, my lad, nothing of the kind," said Brand. "I only wanted to bring you to your senses. Now follow close in our wake till we make the island."

And on they sailed, making a boat-voyage, tedious indeed, but free from further adventure, till they sighted the blue, clearly-seen shores of the island one afternoon just before sundown.

There was the mountain rising up against the glowing sky, the sun setting at last as if close behind it, throwing it up so plainly that it required no great stretch of the imagination to fancy that the plantation-house could be seen half-way up.

Night fell, and they sailed on still, there being no dangerous reefs here to keep them off; but the wind was unfavourable, and the progress slow.

It was Lee's watch that night, and a trusty hand was at the helm. As for the other boat, that was about a quarter of a mile astern; and now, utterly weary, but with a calm sense of security, and thinking of the meeting on the morrow, Brand took his final look round, and then lay down to sleep.

How long he had slept he knew not, but he was awakened by a hand laid upon his breast, and opening his eyes, it was to see Richard Lee leaning over him, his face lit up by a strange glow, as he stooped down, with one arm outstretched.

"Morning?" exclaimed Brand, starting up.

"No, sir, fire!" was the reply.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE young man's heart leaped, as he saw plainly enough from the direction of the land the bright ruddy glow of a fierce fire. Upon what part of the island it was he could not, of course, tell, for there was no guide—nothing to be seen but the red glare lighting up the dark sky; and with the wind still blowing keenly from a quarter that compelled them to tack again and again, the advance of the boat was but slow.

The surmises of the men were various, as were the localities determined upon: some said it was the house at the head of the bay, others that it must be the warehouses; others again, and among them Harris, favoured the theory that it was one of the negro villages. One thing, though, seemed certain,—that it was not the plantation-house half-way up the mountain.

It was a disheartening task, sitting there inactively watching the progress of a fire, and knowing that there was disaffection amongst the slaves, wondering whether this could be in any way connected with it.

At one moment Brand was wishing that he had persuaded Lena to accompany him in the schooner; but the next, he had chased the folly away, telling himself that his ideas were romantic and absurd.

A few words with Lee explained that the fire had been but of very short duration when he was called, the flames seeming to have darted into the air suddenly; and as Brand sat there watching, it was to see before long that the glow was perceptibly less, and long before morning it had completely faded from their sight, leaving the sky once more dark and star-spangled, with the wind still blowing almost dead in their teeth.

Brand watched anxiously till the first golden messengers far on high proclaimed the coming of the morn, when the sun rose, with the boats sailing slowly some half-dozen miles from the island, and tacking to and fro in their endeavours to make the bay.

“Out with your oars now, my lads,” said Brand.

These soon effected a change, the men brightening up now that the harbour was so near at hand.

They had a quip and a jest to pass round, and a few remarks concerning a holiday ashore.

Brand did not like to check them; but his heart was full of forebodings as they drew nearer to the bay.

As far as he could see, all was bright and glowing as ever. But for that fire he would have been ready to accuse himself of folly; for gradually opening out before them was as lovely a scene of peace as eye could rest upon.

"Give way, my lads!" he exclaimed at last, for in his anxious mood the boat seemed to crawl.

"Look here, sir," cried old Harris suddenly, "if you'll take my advice you'll have the helm put up a bit, and run for that p'int yonder. There's some one making signals."

Brand looked in the direction pointed out, and, shading his eyes from the sun, he made out that there was a figure close beneath some trees to the south of where the bay opened, making signals with a handkerchief, which he was waving frantically above his head.

"Run for yonder point," said Brand. The boat's direction was changed a little, and catching the wind now, it ran rapidly towards the figure, which did not for a moment cease to wave the handkerchief it held.

"He's in a hurry, whoever he is," growled Harris, as they got closer in. "Any one would think the island was too hot to hold him, and that what he wanted to do was to give us a dollar a-piece to ferry him over to the tother side—anywheres, you know: Europe, Asia, or Africa.—We're a-coming. You'll make that 'ere arm o' yourn ache d'reckly."

On went the boat, catching the morning breeze

more and more, till she seemed to leap over the waves, which grew rougher as they neared the shore; for though the landlocked bay was perfectly smooth, on the outer shores of the island the great rollers swept in, making a surf so strong as to render it dangerous to land.

"Any one would think that he was in a terrible stoo," said Harris at last, after watching the figure for some time. "Put yer handkerchy away, man: we're a-comin' as fast as we can, and we can't come no faster. What's the good o' makin' yourself a human windmill? Keep quiet, will you? Why can't you take a bit of advice when it's given you? I know that 'ere arm'll ache like fury."

He spoke in such an injured tone that the men laughed heartily; for why should they not be amused? The schooner was sunk, certainly; but that was not their loss. They had done their best to save her; and now, after much toil, they had reached the pleasant isle once more. It was a time for them to be light-hearted, and any trifle afforded them mirth.

"Why, I say!" exclaimed Harris suddenly, "way there—another p'int or two!"—this to the helmsman. "I say, ease that sheet a bit, will you? Do you want us to be over? Don't you see how the breeze freshens? Here, some on you, sit over to wind'ard, will you, and trim the boat? That'll do. Now we're going 'an'sum. But, I say!" he exclaimed, making a telescope of his hands, "if I don't—yes—no—why, hang me!" he cried, slapping his thighs, "if it ain't old Caterpillar!"

"What! who?" exclaimed Brand.

"The overseer, sir—that old nigger-licker with the long legs and yaller jaws—him as looks as if he

had been suckled on egg-yolks, and got the perennial jarnders hot and strong. It's him, sure enough. Get your hand over your eyes and look."

"I believe you're right, Harris," said Brand, in an agitated voice; "but what can he be there for alone?"

"Goodness knows, sir! S'pose you'll go on, though?"

"Go on? Yes, of course," cried Brand.

The boat darted forward till she was fast nearing the heavy rollers, and not many hundred yards from where Jefferson—for he it was—still stood, frantically signalling; though now they could see that he was looking behind him from time to time.

"I tell you what," said Harris, "if you take a bit of advice, you'll tie the sleeves of a jacket and the legs of a pair of trousers tight up with some spun yarn, for that 'ere chap's licked niggers till he's a lunatic. He's mad as a March hare, and madder, too, or else he wouldn't be out yonder by himself. No one lives out here. Depend upon it, he's turned into a regular wild man o' the woods since we've been away, and that we shall want a strait-waistcoat, don't doubt. But hallo!"

"Here, quick! run her up! Give way, men—take your oars! For heaven's sake look sharp: the man will be killed!"

George Brand was an Englishman born and bred, and though he had hated Jefferson intensely, he could not stand and see a fellow-man in peril without stretching forth a hand to help.

His exclamations were well timed, for now, to the astonishment of all on board the boat, the cause of the overseer's violent signalling became evident.

Suddenly, from out of the wood behind, a dozen negroes, one and all carrying some weapon or another, rushed and made at Jefferson, who, after one final dumb appeal for succour to those in the boat, levelled the gun he carried, fired, and a negro dropped. The others, however, came on furiously, in spite of the overseer's clubbed rifle, which he now swung round his head with all the energy of despair.

"They're in earnest anyhow!" cried Harris, as they neared the scene of the fray.

For he saw two blacks roll over from the furious club blows of the rifle-butt.

There was evidently, though, no chance for the overseer to escape with life unless help came quickly, for the blacks were furious, and closing in upon him rapidly as he backed towards the boat. It almost seemed as if they were maddened by the fear of losing him whom they had marked out for their victim, so savagely did they press on.

But, nerved by despair, Jefferson fought well; and, though he had received many a cruel blow, two more blacks went down before he was amongst the breakers, beaten down upon one knee, apparently lost. A stalwart black, who had pressed him harder than any of the others, now raised a mattock, and in another moment the overseer would have been brained, when, with a rush through the foam, Brand dashed in unarmed, but his fist darted out from his shoulder like a flash, striking the powerful black right in the throat, and he went down as if felled by a poleaxe.

"Give it 'em, my lads! Take my advice, and never mind their heads—niggers' heads is made o' ebony—lay into their shins!"

So shouted Harris, as, with half-a-dozen sailors, each armed with an oar, he made at the blacks, who, after a few blows, turned and fled, leaving their adversaries masters of the field; and in less time than it takes to relate it, Jefferson was caught up, run through the breakers, rolled on board, and the men forced the boat through the white water, climbing in themselves the next moment, to bale furiously, for she was half full of water.

"What is the meaning of all this, Mr. Jefferson?" asked Brand anxiously, as soon as they were beyond the reach of the breakers, and the boat was being headed for the bay.

"Meaning!" cried Jefferson savagely, as he glared in a wild, malignant way at Brand. "You've come back, then?"

"Yes," said Brand fiercely; "you did not drown us this time!"

He repented his words the next moment; but if countenance could speak, that of the Yankee showed plainly enough who was the guilty man.

"But we'll talk of that by-and-by. There was a fire last night," said Brand. "We saw it from out yonder. What does it all mean? Have the blacks risen?"

"Oh, nothing," said Jefferson with a malignant grin. "They are a little at their mischief."

It was plain enough that this man was not to be trusted. Brand could see that; but then, every scrap of information was valuable, and there was none other present to ask.

"Where is Mr. Ansdell?" cried Brand then.

"And Miss Ansdell?" panted Jefferson, for his breast heaved still with his fearful exertions.

"Yes, where are they both?" cried Brand, unable to restrain his impatience.

"Oh, up at the house, I should think," was the reply.

And the man showed his teeth as he pointed across the bay.

"There's something at the bottom of all this here, sir," whispered Harris. "Take my advice, sir, don't you trust him an inch."

"I don't mean to," was the whispered reply; "but run us up as quickly as you can."

Before they reached the wharf they caught a glimpse of the warehouse, a wall or two, and a heap of charred ruins; while a glance through the trees higher up gave them a faint glimpse of the plantation-house, a blackened ruin.

Brand turned to Jefferson, who was watching him narrowly with the same vile expression upon his countenance.

The boat was about to be headed for the house at the top of the bay, which seemed to stand uninjured, when a word from Lee drew all attention to another figure, signalling to be taken on board, from the sands near the old wharf; while, as they looked, half-a-dozen blacks rushed out of the woods, and pursued the signaller along the sands, till nearly opposite the boat, where he rushed through the shallow water, and, being a good swimmer, he was soon taken on board.

"Joe Wilton!" cried Brand, amazed.

"Thank Heaven!" was the poor fellow's first remark as he turned to Brand. "Get over to the other side; some of them may yet be alive."

"In Heaven's name, tell me what all this means!"

cried Brand frantically. "What is wrong—and where is Miss Ansdell?"

"In heaven," was the calm, sad reply. "The blacks rose, sir, and have burnt and murdered all before them. Plantation-house, the warehouse, and my father's home have been destroyed, and the last while I was away. I came to try if I could get some more powder, after we had fought to the last; but it was impossible, and I have been hunted ever since. They burnt my father's place last, and they are round there still in force," he added, as he pointed across the bay to the rocky point, where, for the first time, Brand now saw a mass of blackened ruins.

"Who were there?" he asked hoarsely.

"All of them. The women and the men—all but this one," he continued contemptuously, "who left us in the lurch."

Jefferson did not speak, but smiled at both maliciously.

"What?" cried Brand just then, for the other's lips moved.

"This," whispered Jefferson, "that if I cannot have her, you never will. She's dead, man—dead! They burned them all last night, while I lay in the cane plantation, and heard them shriek for mercy."

"You dog!" cried Joe Wilton, striking the overseer across the mouth with the back of his hand. "It is through you that all this horror has come to pass, and now you insult us."

Jefferson made as if to use his gun; but a strong arm was upon his shoulder, and, looking up, there was Harris at his side.

"I believe I should be givin' good advice," said the old sailor, "if I told our lads here to pitch you

overboard; for you arn't no use, nor yet no ornament. You only make people spiteful. Jest *you* take a bit of advice, my yellow friend, and hold your tongue while you're safe."

The second boat was signalled, and both now ran for the spot where the Wiltons' house had stood, and after a few words of consultation it was resolved to land, each man arming himself with an oar.

They had hardly run the boats upon the sands and sprung ashore before a motley crew of blacks came yelling out from the plantation and rushed at them. For a moment the sailors wavered, and made as if to run back to the boats; but, shouting to them to come on, Brand rushed forward, armed with the boat-hook. Harris and Lee followed, and the rest, cheered by the example, dashed on after them, striking right and left at the enemy, till, staggered by the bold onslaught, they turned and fled, leaving the crew of the schooner masters of the field.

"There, go and search!" exclaimed Joe Wilton, in a choking voice, pointing to the charred heap that had not ceased to smoke—"I can't, I have not the courage."

George Brand stood still, for his heart, too, failed. He dared not advance to gaze upon the remains of the victims of that fearful night.

At last, though, he stepped forward, but only to start back in real alarm, as from behind the charred heap a black figure, which he took for a fresh foe, rose up, ran forward, and then fell, and rolled over.

He half rose, though, the next moment, and pointed towards the spot from whence he came, as Joe Wilton darted on.

"What, Tom!" he cried joyfully.

"The cave—the cave!" was the hoarse reply. And then the poor fellow fainted.

"Here! come here, quick!" shouted the younger Wilton excitedly.

Rushing quickly over the charred ruins, he leaped at the opening from which his brother had emerged, and began to tear aside the blackened planks, till Brand came to his side, when, leaping into a rugged opening, the young man returned the next minute, bearing what seemed to be a corpse, and laid it down upon the sands.

Brand plunged in the next, to find himself in a cavern-like cellar; and as his eyes became used to the darkness, he could see that at the extreme end, lying in various attitudes amongst casks and lumber, were those whom they sought; but whether living or dead it was impossible then to say.

Before ten minutes had elapsed all were borne out, and laid upon the sands, where, with the soft breeze playing upon their checks, first one and then another began to show some tokens of reviving consciousness, till George Brand, as he knelt there with his arm beneath a blackened, pallid head, began to feel that he had not, after all, arrived too late; the cave, beside which the house of the Wiltons had been built, for the sake of the convenience it afforded as a cellar, having formed a place of refuge to which they were driven by the fire, whose suffocating fumes had all but proved fatal.

The men of the party quickly revived; and it was well they did, for they served to reinforce the crew of the schooner; for now, once more, the blacks came yelling from the wood, but only to be encountered

by so bold a front that they had to retreat, but not without a struggle, in which all took part.

"I don't know, cap'en ; but it strikes me as the boats would be the safest place," said Harris, coming up, and wiping the perspiration from his forehead. "Oars are heavy weepuns, and we've lost one man now as a prisoner. We may lose more next time."

"Who is taken?" eagerly inquired Brand.

"Old Caterpillar—a villain!" replied Harris, in indignant tones, as he stepped forward, and whispered in the young skipper's ear.

"Are you certain?"

"Swear it," was the laconic reply. "He'd covered you with that rifle of his, and I was too much startled and took aback to run and stop him; and it's my belief he'd have fired. But he was so took up with his aiming that he didn't see a black fellow rush at him; and, before any one could interfere, he was beaten down, and half-a-dozen of them dragged him through there."

And the old sailor pointed to an opening amongst the trees.

"Quick, quick—some of you, come on!" shouted Brand excitedly; "we must not leave a white man in their hands."

"Here, come on and be killed," growled Harris. "Nobody won't take advice nowadays."

He ran after Brand, closely followed by half-a-dozen sailors and both the Wiltons; but they returned at the end of a few minutes, shuddering and horror-stricken, for they had seen the last of the overseer.

Dreading a fresh attack from the blacks, the whole party embarked in the two boats, loading them almost to the water's edge; but by careful seamanship they both arrived in safety at a tiny key, some twenty miles away, where part were landed, while the rest made a safe run to Kingston, from whence a small sloop immediately started for the remainder.

Old Harris was amongst those who stayed behind, because he said he had a liking for Mr. Ansdell, and he didn't care to leave the skipper, who stayed as well.

"And Heaven bless you," said the old sailor, when relating the incidents from which the notes for this story were made, "if you'll take my advice, you'll get married, for a prettier sight than to see them two—the skipper and Miss Lena—walking about in that island, like a young Adam and Eve in everyday life in a new garden of Eden, you couldn't find nowhere, and so I tell you.

"But that affair left its mark on most, in the shape of scars and burns; and that young Tom Wilton had a sort of scar, too, which troubled him—a sort of heart-mark about Miss Lena; but he acted like a man, he did, when he saw she cared for somebody else, and she looked upon him as a true friend when we all got back to Jamaiky.

"Our skipper's been married a many year now; but he keeps to the old trading still amongst the islands; and last time we were that way, we landed at the old place for water, and found the Wiltons and Headleys had got back, and married together, and built again, and were cultivating the land. They told me they'd been back ever since six months after the break-out; for they heard from a ship as

stopped there that the place was empty, the blacks having boated and canoed themselves away somewhere, where no one knew, nor wanted to, for they were a good deal drove to what they did; and if I gave my advice to anybody, I'd say, 'Don't make no man a slave:' and if they took that there bit of advice, I should go a little further, and say, 'If you must live somewhere, let it be where you can be safe, and not in such a biling-over sort of a place as was Plantation Island.'"

A SECRET OF THE SEA

By JOHN A. HIGGINSON

(LATE ROYAL MAIL STEAM-PACKET COMPANY)

CHAPTER I

SO that you may more readily understand how my long acquaintance with Captain Spanker was suddenly cut short, I shall briefly lay before you the facts. You will then be enabled to form an unbiassed opinion, and at the same time appreciate the succession of extraordinary adventures which led on to the partnership between myself and Thomas Yeardley, the tried and constant sharer of all my subsequent successes or failures. Under the command of Captain Spanker I, Robert Martin, sailed as boy and man during a period of ten years, and finally stood upon the quarter-deck of his ship in the capacity of her first mate.

In the earlier portion of the year 1862 I gained my last certificate of qualification in the mercantile marine, and was hoping that another voyage would find me in command of a vessel. But lo! the skipper suddenly requested the relinquishment of my position — a position faithfully discharged during three years—in favour of his nephew. The latter was anxious to complete his services for

"master," and I was offered an inferior position. Of course, it was easy to feel the set of the wind, and there and then I resigned my berth, and immediately determined to proceed to Australia, where lived many friends. Having formed that decision, it was a matter of indifference in what capacity the voyage was made. Certainly I would not *pay* for what might be had for the asking, and if a higher-grade berth was not obtainable, then I determined to sail before the mast. So my gear was stowed, and my savings withdrawn from the bank, and with them I took train for London in search of an Australian-bound vessel.

And there I found the ship *Moonbeam* on the point of sailing for Sydney, N.S.W. Her list of officers was complete, but I took a berth in her forecastle. Against a south-wester she beat down Channel and put into Plymouth, where many passengers were received, and then the actual voyage commenced. The *Moonbeam* was a splendid clipper of sixteen hundred tons, and that was her maiden voyage. Every one on board believed that she would make a record Australian passage, and certainly her earlier achievements quite bore out that opinion. With a leading wind she raced down Channel and skipped across Biscay Bay without mishap, and in a manner that astonished even her most sanguine admirers.

On one occasion we happened to fall in with a large Liverpool clipper bound toward New Zealand. When first seen the stranger was right ahead, but within three hours she had been overhauled, and dropped astern as though she were actually standing still.

And in that manner the clipper continued the voyage, but on drawing abreast of the western Spanish coast the wind gradually died away, and left us enveloped in a dense fog. Much anxiety arose. From every quarter a vigilant look-out was observed. We were in the track of vessels moving up and down that particularly busy highway, and no one could tell at what moment some steamer might loom close aboard. As night closed in, the fog appeared to grow more dense. At eight bells—eight o'clock—that evening I relieved the look-out on the forecastle. Our side-lights burned brightly. Save the thud of the canvas against the masts or the rigging not a sound disturbed the night, but a peculiar sense of uneasiness was oppressing me, while the fog-blurred form of my shipmate loomed phantom-like on the bow. His voice was full of suppressed anxiety. "That's been the longest two hours I ever stood," he said. "I thought 't would never end."

"The fog is frightful," I replied. "I cannot see anything beyond the boom."

"Who could? You must trust to your ears, mate, and keep the fog-horn going."

Against his lips he placed the horn, and a long, wailing sound, as of a being in distress, struggled through the gloom. "That's my last," Burke added, and then handed me the instrument, but scarcely had I touched it than through the fog there reached our ears the unmistakable shriek of a steam-whistle. The stranger could not be perceived, and in what direction she might be moving it was, of course, impossible to ascertain.

Our hearts almost stood still. We knew from the clearness of the warning that she was much

closer than was desired, and with fixed stare both intently strove to pierce that impenetrable fog. Then suddenly our voices were raised in a cry of alarm—"Light on the port bow!" for through the gloom a faint green light appeared. The steamer was bearing straight down upon our bow. Helpless, the *Moonbeam* rolled on the invisible sea-swell. We were unable to avert the impending collision, and nothing short of a miracle could arrest the blow. Burke, my companion, and I simultaneously sprang to the break of the forecastle. "All hands on deck!" we cried, and the next moment the half-clad crew rushed aft, but we remained at the bow. The cries of alarm on board the strange vessel were distinctly heard, but they were uttered in a foreign tongue. From every hatchway of our ship the terror-stricken emigrants rushed on deck, where ensued a scene of the wildest confusion. Fore and aft men, women, and children shrieked in dismay, some calling upon God for succour, whilst others wrung helplessly their hands, or cried hoarsely to their loved ones still below. And during those terrible moments the foreign ship drew nearer her victim. Her crew were shouting unintelligible orders which, of course, we did not understand, and could not execute if we had. The roar of the escaping steam from her funnels was almost deafening, but even above that there suddenly arose a cry sufficient to chill one's blood. It came from the women and children huddled upon our deck, and after that was heard the order to clear away the boats.

"Stay here," my companion exclaimed, as I made an effort to reach the stern. "We can do no good aft there."

The terrible death-ship was almost upon us then. Indeed, the catastrophe occupied but a very few minutes. From the time the steamer was seen until the moment of collision was but a matter of seconds, but in those brief periods there was stamped upon my mind an indelible picture of the frightful scene.

Like a hideous nightmare the stranger loomed through the deadly fog, and when but a few fathoms distant her green light was blotted out, as though she were slowly sheering away from our vessel. The manœuvre, however, could not prevent the collision.

"Lie down," cried my companion hastily, and both dropped prone on the forecastle-head. Immediately afterwards the bow of the steamer struck us a little abaft the port fore-rigging, and with crash of rending timber she ripped the clipper from waterways to far below the load-line. So severe was the blow that our vessel heeled heavily to starboard. She was almost cut in two, and it was clear that when the ships parted the *Moonbeam* would immediately founder. A dreadful silence was broken by the voice of our captain—there was one hope of saving life, and he seized it.

"Keep her where she is," he shouted to those on board the stranger, and had that order been carried out many lives would have been saved. The foreigners, however, could not have heard, or did not understand the words, for although we could feel the machinery again set in motion, to our inexpressible horror the stem of the stranger slowly worked its way out of the gap it had made.

A sickening shriek rose from the stern of our vessel. We knew at once that the clipper was doomed, and the lives of all placed in great peril.

“For your life!” Burke cried, as seizing my wrist he dragged me toward the break at the forecandle, and together we leaped upon the main deck, and almost on the edge of the chasm in the side of the ship.

High above our heads loomed the bow of the retreating steamer. The agonised cries for help rung in our ears. Not one word of hope did we hear flung out from that terrible iron bow, but quickly climbing the backstays of our ship Burke and I presently succeeded in gaining a foothold on the deck of the still retreating foreigner. One moment of delay would have proved fatal. There was absolutely no time for thought other than a fierce determination to live, but both speedily discovered that no one save ourselves had made good their escape from the sinking clipper. There was a hope that some of the boats might have got clear with many valuable lives, but we could not imagine all hands rescued, since it would have occupied much time in getting every boat safely over the side.

And all that while the steamer kept steadily moving astern. No attempt to clear her boats was made, and as the terrible suspicion of her intended treachery crossed our minds, a cry of horror rose from the bow, for the *Moonbeam* had disappeared in the fog.

CHAPTER II

WITH intense anxiety we awaited the stoppage of the steamer, and the lowering of her boats. Our cries presently attracted attention. Several foreigners hurried forward, and with vehement gesticulation demanded instant silence. While they were examining

the bow, the engines stopped, and Burke and I at once cleared away a boat ready to lower the moment the vessel had lost stern-way. Then we hastened toward the bridge for assistance, but the captain paid no heed to our entreaties. We became excited, and were still more incensed when through the fog there burst such a fearful shriek as must have appalled any but an inhuman mind. And yet that foreign captain made no sign. In the calmest manner he hailed the bow and received, as seemed to me, a reassuring reply. He next spoke to the helmsman, and then telegraphed to the engine-room for half-speed ahead. I looked in the compass—we were moving away from the scene of the collision, where, perhaps, many people were clinging to the wreckage, and vainly awaiting our return!

Stung to the verge of madness by such barbarous conduct, Burke and I rushed upon the bridge, and forcing aside the officer attending the engine signals, I reversed the order, and shouted to the helmsman to shift the wheel. The captain rushed along the bridge and struck me in the face, but he was instantly laid upon his back, while over the prostrate form Burke sent flying the astonished chief officer. Then followed a brief, but unequal struggle. The crew clambered upon the bridge hoping to rescue their captain, and for a time we succeeded in keeping them at bay till the captain signified his intention of carrying out our demands. Under that persuasion we retired to the deck, where, suddenly, I received a blow that rendered me insensible. When consciousness returned I discovered that daylight was just showing through the porthole of a small room in which I was confined. A dismal groan presently

attracted attention, and then I saw that Burke was lying close by, while round him the deck was covered with blood. My cries for assistance were answered by some men thrusting their heads through the partially opened door. I pointed to my companion and asked for water, which was supplied, as likewise a bucket and a cloth with which the deck was cleaned. Burke had been stabbed in the back, and was still insensible. I rendered him what assistance was possible, and after a time he regained his senses. "I'm done for, mate," he said feebly, and although I tried to speak hopefully of his recovery, it was evident that his injury was serious. We laid him upon a bed in a corner of the room, and when alone he took from his pocket a small package which he handed to me.

"Keep it," he said, "and it will tell you where the treasure lies."

I thought his mind was wandering, but awaited further disclosures. After a time he became somewhat stronger, and in disjointed sentences related an extraordinary story. From what I could gather it appeared that some eight years previously Burke had shipped at San Francisco on board a brig named the *Gannet*, which sailed for Panama. She had on board a considerable quantity of bar-gold, but despite the secrecy with which it was shipped a number of desperadoes discovered its whereabouts and signed articles for the voyage. One night the men aroused my companion, and inquired if he could navigate the brig. His affirmative reply saved his life, and thereupon the men locked him in the fore-castle, and began the murder of every officer on board. They discovered where the gold was hidden, and each man duly received his share. After that the

mutineers started drinking, and it was not long before a desperate fight ensued. Two of the men were so seriously injured that the boss decided to run them ashore, and when an island was seen the boat was manned and the invalids sent ashore. But the boat was scarcely clear than the brig filled away, while those on board laughed heartily at their successful ruse, and divided between themselves the whole of the treasure. After that they directed Burke to steer for the Australian coast, and he was compelled to do so. In the height of a gale the brig drove through one of the channels in the Great Barrier Reef, which extends at varying distances along the north-eastern coast of Australia, till at length she struck the coast some fifty or sixty miles north of Halifax Bay and became a total wreck.

Of his companions Burke never obtained the least clue. They had been drowned, he said, but while wandering along the coast he was made prisoner by a wandering tribe of natives, and with them he lived in the bush nearly seven years. The hardships of that life injured his health. Anyhow, the crowd one day struck a white settlement, and there their prisoner remained until strong enough to go southward, where, under medical advice, he was ordered home for change of air as the best means to his recovery. That order was immediately carried out, with beneficial results. The moment his health permitted he determined to return to Australia, and toward that end he shipped in the *Moonbeam*, and was now rapidly sinking from the fatal stab of a cowardly foreigner who should have been his protector.

"Now, mate," Burke added feebly, "don't imagine this is an idle shellback's yarn. It was my own

hands put the brig where she lies. She may have slipped off the reef into deep water, but that accident would help to hide her cargo from prying eyes. Fifty miles north of Halifax Bay you will find the spot I have marked out on the rough chart I gave you just now, and the treasure must still be there, for it lies upon an almost unknown section of the coast."

"Have you no friends?" I inquired.

"None that I care about," he replied. "You'll see me decently buried, mate?"

"Don't fear—I'll stand by you to the last," I said.

Almost immediately afterwards he became insensible. I called for further assistance, and even beat heavily on the door, but no one appeared, and thus I was left during the whole of that day alone with the dying sailor.

Shortly before sundown the engines again stopped, and then I heard something strike the vessel. After a time the door of our prison was opened, and there stood the foreign captain and a swarthy individual, whom I took to be a Spanish fisherman. At a sign from the former two sailors entered, and seizing my arms held me fast while the captain manacled my arms behind my back, and hastily bound over my eyes a stout piece of canvas. Then followed the low murmur of voices. Several men entered the room, and I knew that they were carrying Burke away. After some delay I was helped to my feet and half carried, half dragged to the deck, and immediately lowered into a boat alongside. The crew of the latter at once pushed off, and after a somewhat lengthy pull we ran alongside a larger vessel, into which I was assisted, and then the cloth was removed from my eyes. With eagerness I

searched the sea for some trace of the steamer, so that by her rig, her build, or the colour of her funnels she might yet be recognised, but a long wisp of low-lying smoke was alone visible, and with keen regret I turned my attention toward those by whom I was surrounded. The vessel was a beamy but somewhat shallow fishing-boat, and her skipper was the Spaniard whom I had seen enter the room on board the steamer. Then my gaze fell upon a covered object lying on some nets, and I knew it was the body of my late companion. Yes, Burke was dead, and the fact caused me much regret, but to give the fishermen their due they treated me with some consideration, and soon supplied a hearty meal, of which I stood in need.

During the early hours of the following morning we dropped anchor in a small bay, and the crew immediately removed the irons from my wrists, which until then they stubbornly refused to do. The remains of my friend were placed in the boat, and with them I was taken on shore, and lodged in the house of the skipper. After breakfast I was removed to another house, and there confined alone in a lower room. The reason of such behaviour speedily became evident. The dead man could tell no tales, and his burial would excite little curiosity, but as the fishermen had probably been well paid to keep me a close prisoner until suspicion of the collision passed away, it was possible that my presence in the village was unknown to any one save my captors. To effect an escape appeared doubtful. The walls of my prison were rough and thick, and entirely devoid of windows. To raise a disturbance by beating on the door would possibly excite the wrath of

the fishermen, and end as disastrously for me as it had for my unfortunate shipmate.

In groping about the room I came across a large cask, together with a quantity of rope, which set me thinking. On looking upward I suddenly perceived a thin ray of light, which apparently came through a hole in the roof or a small aperture high up in the wall. And now I also perceived that several rafters, or heavy beams of wood, stretched from wall to wall overhead. In a moment the cask was rolled beneath the light, and selecting a strong piece of rope I mounted the cask and had soon swung myself level with the daylight, and amongst innumerable cobwebs hanging from the tiles. On looking outward I could see for some considerable distance along a roughly-paved road lined on either side with cottages belonging to the natives, many of whom were passing to and fro in the direction of the fishing-skipper's house, and I speedily concluded that they were assisting at the burial of my late companion. That conjecture proved to be correct. It was not long before I perceived a priest, or monk, approaching my prison walls, and at once I determined to seek his assistance. I waited until he was close at hand and then raised my voice in a loud cry—"Help, help!" As though shot, the reverend father stood motionless. Again the cry was repeated, and then the priest raised his head and looked in my direction, although, owing to the smallness of the opening through which I had shouted, he could see nothing of me. A crowd of women and children speedily assembled. I saw the priest speaking to some men, who shook their heads as though unable to account for my presence in their midst,

and soon afterwards the reverend father disappeared. It was not long, however, before a violent discussion arose outside the door of my prison, the end being that the priest burst it open, and in great indignation entered the room. By that time I had descended from among the rafters, and must have cut but a sorry figure after contact with the dust and cobwebs of many years' gathering. From anger to a burst of laughter the good priest's mood immediately changed. He addressed me in the Spanish tongue, but receiving no reply he beckoned me from the room, and in the open street roundly upbraided the skipper for his dastardly conduct. On the seashore I drew a rough sketch of the collision, and meanwhile indicated that many lives had been sacrificed by the behaviour of those on the steamer, and I even went to the length of pointing out the fatal stab on the body of my companion. So shocked did the priest become by such revelations that he straightway took me to his own dwelling, where refreshments were supplied, and after a good wash, and cleansing of my clothes, we together went toward the small graveyard where had meanwhile been conveyed the remains of my murdered friend.

After the burial the priest made me understand that during the coming night he would have me sent on to a place of safety some twenty miles farther east, as his suspicions of the fishermen's intentions toward me were fully aroused. The information occasioned vast relief, and after dark he and I ascended toward a narrow road above the village, where was found the priest's own serving-man in charge of a well-horsed vehicle. As soon as I was seated, the priest shook my hand warmly,

and spoke earnestly to my conductor; having, as best I could, returned hearty thanks for such needed assistance, the conveyance moved off.

The night proved cloudy, with occasional light showers, and such greatly assisted the escape. My companion was unable to speak English, and I myself felt in no way inclined for conversation, but closely watched the progress of the vehicle. The route lay along the summit of the rock-bound coast—whence came but softly the booming of the sea far below—or, down a rough and somewhat dangerous pathway leading to the beach, and then presently moving upward to the plains above. In such manner several hours passed. Slowly, but safely, the conveyance moved farther from my late custodians, until in the early hours of the following morning we pulled up at a wayside inn, and after some delay were admitted. My conductor now handed to the landlord a letter from the priest, and then a meal was served. After a good smoke we agreed to turn in. How long I had slept is uncertain, for suddenly I was awakened by the seizure and binding of my limbs, and in that condition I was carried from the house, and finally placed in a boat apparently awaiting my arrival.

Judge of my consternation when presently I discovered that my captors were none other than the fishermen from whom I had but recently escaped. They had either preceded or followed us along the coast, and evidently were fully aware of all our plans; but of their actual intentions, or what fate still awaited me at the hands of such kidnappers, it was, of course, impossible to imagine. And thus were my hopes of a speedy deliverance dashed to the ground.

CHAPTER III

DAYLIGHT found the Spanish coast some five miles a-lee, while the boat headed westward toward a precipitous headland two points on the lee bow.

An hour later the helm was put up, and we ran for a narrow opening in the cliffs, through which the boat passed, until we were almost becalmed in the middle of a small cove. Right ahead several boats were moored, and among their crews our presence occasioned some confusion. A cry from our skipper, however, soon allayed their fears, and we presently made fast alongside the outermost vessel. After considerable chattering there stepped into our craft a stalwart-looking man, who, to my great joy, said cheerily—

“Hullo, my hearty! down on your luck, eh?”

“Rather,” I replied; “those rascals have treated me cruelly—just look how I am bound.”

“They say you’re crazy.”

“Nonsense!” cried I indignantly, and when my story was told the stranger turned furiously on my captors, and in no gentle tones apparently demanded my release. The bonds were soon cut from my limbs.

“Come on board my cutter,” the stranger said, and I was soon seated in her cabin.

“You’ve had a hard time of it,” he added; “but I’ll see you through, now, and between ourselves I fancy those chaps are glad enough to be rid of you.”

“Thanks,” said I, “you are a good friend.”

“Well,” he continued, “let us start square. If I give ’ee a passage home you’ll keep your mouth shut as to what you see here, eh?”

"Certainly," I replied.

"And, no doubt, you're wondering what brings me here. Well, I do some smuggling along this coast, but nothing of the kind on *our side* the Channel, you understand. I'm ready to sail in the morning, and am bound for Plymouth."

"Then you are the skipper, I reckon?"

"And the owner of the *Mary Jane*—that's the name of this craft," he added.

His explanations afforded much satisfaction.

The cove I soon discovered to be a smuggling rendezvous used by the natives of the coast: but there were no signs of houses on shore, neither any indications of cattle or tillage.

Early next morning all the small rowing-boats towed the cutter to sea, and under full sail the smart craft soon left far astern the country in which I had received scant hospitality.

The *Mary Jane* was a stanch little vessel of about sixty tons, and her crew of four hands were strong, healthy young men. Of her skipper I entertained the highest opinion, and as he sat beside the tiller I considered him as fine-looking a fellow as could well be found. He looked about fifty years of age; his hair and heavy beard were dark brown: he was broad-chested, with great limbs and a fearless eye—he was indeed a thorough British sailor.

"What do 'ee think of her?" he inquired.

"Sails fast," I replied: and then, quite unconsciously, asked a question which subsequently proved of much importance. "Have you been long in this trade, skipper?"

"Several years," said he: "but what with the growing competition of foreigners the labour's scarcely

worth the candle now. I wish you knew of something better risking."

The recollection of Burke's strange story suddenly crossed my mind. The anxiety and adventures lately encountered had quite obliterated all thought of the sunken gold; but now that I was in an English vessel, and free from annoyance, the strange narrative was recalled with growing interest. What if the yarn proved true? The details were not beyond realisation, and if in England I could verify them, I might become independent. Why not prosecute a searching inquiry? Here I had to hand the very vessel most suitable for the venture, and her owner seeking a new outlet for his energies. I determined to ask his advice.

"Suppose I could tell you of something better?" I said.

"Well, let's hear it," he returned smilingly.

"Willingly, skipper, but not here."

He shouted "Billy!" and a hand came aft. "Keep her as she goes, a clean full," he said.

"Clean full," echoed Billy, as he gripped the tiller; and we went below.

On the small table the skipper placed smoking materials, but as the *Mary Jane* was then skipping along in very lively mood, we held fast the mugs, which were filled with hot coffee taken from the stove. "Make yourself comfortable," he remarked. "You were saying——"

"That I believe I can put you in the way of a good venture," I said hastily; "but you must promise to keep my secret, whichever way it goes."

"When Tom Yeardley gives 'ee that," said he, and extended over the table his hand, "you can rest easy."

And thereupon I related the incidents of the mutiny and wreck of the *Gannet*.

During the recital Yeardley leaned back against the bulkhead, puffing through the cabin great clouds of smoke, and stroking his handsome beard and moustaches.

"What became of that chart you say Burke gave you?" he inquired, when the facts were known.

Until that moment its existence had been forgotten, but it was soon lying between us on the table. Its outer covering consisted of coarse flannel, secured by twine, and under that a tin tobacco-box was found. From the latter was extracted a small roll of linen, which we spread flat on the board. On it were the outlines of a horseshoe-shaped bay, across which extended a thick line marked "Reef," and nearly in the centre of that appeared a star, under which stood the word "Wreck." The land all round the bay was dotted with marks, that were apparently meant to represent trees, and also in several places stood the word "Bush," as though a thick growth of timber came almost close to the sea. On the southern horn of the bay there were depicted four large trees, while between them and the opposite end of the "Reef" a space marked "Channel," indicated the fairway into what Burke had named "Woody Bay."

Tom Yeardley became greatly interested in the chart.

"Do you think the yarn can be true?" he inquired.

"Much more unlikely things have happened," I replied; "but before we decide definitely on any course, I must find out at 'Lloyd's' if the *Gannet* did actually leave 'Frisco' at the time Burke stated."

"And suppose she did?"

"Then I shall immediately sail for Woody Bay, and if you care to risk the cutter we'll go halves in the find."

"Who's going to navigate her?"

"I hold a master's certificate," I said.

"By gum!" he returned thoughtfully, "I'm already half inclined to chance it; but I don't see how the little vessel could be sailed so far."

"Why not, skipper?"

"There's the grub and the water."

"Between this and Cape Town," I said, "there are many ports of call. Our longest stretch would be from Table Bay to Queensland—say three months."

"Humph! It seems easy enough from your standpoint," he observed. "Anyhow, I thank you for the confidence; and now listen to me. This vessel, as you already know, belongs to me. There is no one at home for whom I need toil, since my wife died three years ago, and my only son, Jack, is already in Australia. I have some two hundred pounds saved, and if later on you can verify Burke's story, I will risk the cutter and the money in the venture. Could you put any coin into it?"

"I have nearly two hundred pounds on me now," said I, "and will invest every penny of it in striving to reach the gold."

"Two hundred! Where?" he inquired eagerly. And thereupon I showed him a flannel belt round my waist, in which had been sewn up all the money withdrawn from the bank, and also my "master's" certificate.

The skipper seemed greatly astonished.

Then and there it was agreed that, should the

incident of the *Gannet* be confirmed, we would immediately set on foot the recovery of the treasure in Woody Bay.

Without accident the cutter reached Plymouth, and I set out for London. To my surprise I there learned that a couple of boats full of people from the *Moonbeam* had safely reached England, and without delay I made all sail for "Lloyd's" on Cornhill. There I found lists of missing vessels collected under their respective dates. A moment's reflection recalled Burke's statement that eight years had elapsed since the loss of the *Gannet*, and as he had died in the year 1862 there was little difficulty in finding the folio of casualties for the year '54—the year in which the brig had left San Francisco. A lengthened scrutiny was rewarded with success. Under the name *Gannet* I read that she had left 'Frisco as Burke stated, and she had on board some one hundred and twenty thousand pounds worth of bar-gold, the whole of which, with the vessel and crew, was supposed to have been lost during a hurricane in the Pacific.

My agitation may easily be imagined, but there was now no longer any room for doubt, and I clearly perceived what steps to pursue. From my belt I extracted sixty pounds, and with them purchased a new outfit, a chronometer, a sextant, several charts of the Australian coast, with books necessary for the voyage, and last, but by no means least, a serviceable revolver and ammunition. With them I hastened to the coast, and found the skipper in a state of great uneasiness lest my journey had proved unsuccessful. The new gear, however, soon showed what the result had been, and over our pipes that

night we warmly shook hands in token of a perfect understanding.

"What about a crew, Tom?" I said.

"The four men with me now," he replied, "are good for the voyage, and I'll ship two more."

"We must have a diver."

"I know one who will likely run the risk, but you must not take notice of his gruff manner; his bark's a deal worse than his bite."

And that very night the skipper took me to a cottage on the outskirts of the town, where without ceremony Yeardley raised the door-latch, and we entered a dark room smelling strongly of stale tobacco. Into what appeared like a cupboard Tom thrust his head, and shouted, "Barber ahoy! Are 'ee at home?"

I now discovered that the "cupboard" was a narrow flight of stairs, down which tramped heavily a pair of sea-boots, surmounted by a canvas overall, and the sou'-westered head of a surly-looking individual bearing a lighted candle. First impressions count for something with most people, and mine were not agreeably disposed toward the stranger, who placed on the table the candlestick, and said gruffly, "Night, Tom."

"Good-night, Joe," the skipper replied. "This gentleman and I have come to ask if you want a job."

"Suttinly—diving?" the man returned.

"In a wreck, Joe," Yeardley explained. "But she's far away from here."

"That don't matter. Monthly wages, or lump sum down?"

The skipper turned to me. "This is the man I

spoke about," he said. "His name's Barber, and I think he will suit us. I've known him many years."

"Well, Barber," I said, "your work would be on the Australian coast, and if successful we would give you five thousand pounds for the risk."

After considerable hesitation the diver spoke. "It's a long voyage," he said, "and the expenses would be heavy. Well, say *six* thousand, and I'll go."

"Very good," said I, "we'll call it that. I suppose you have all the necessary gear?"

"Of course," he replied. "When will I put 'em on board?"

"We're sailing in Yeardley's cutter," I returned, "and as soon as she is ready we'll let you know."

On the following morning the skipper and I set about a thorough overhaul of his vessel. Inside and out she was thoroughly cleaned. Fore and aft in her hold we had several water-tanks secured on either side of the keelson, and as each was emptied at sea it could be re-filled with salt water, and thus keep the craft in good sailing trim. After that we laid in a large stock of provisions, had all her rigging and sails renewed or repaired, and to make a long story shorter, within six weeks of our arrival in Plymouth the cutter was ready to face her long voyage.

Her old crew readily agreed to accept our terms for the venture. Yeardley found a couple of extra hands willing to join, while Joseph Barber speedily had on board the whole of his diving apparatus; but not until the last moment of the departure did we disclose to the crew our actual destination, fearing it might become known on shore.

On a fine April morning the anchor was raised, and before a fresh north-wester the *Mary Jane* skipped

southward on a voyage destined to be full of adventure, and by no means devoid of heart-aching anxiety to every man on board.

CHAPTER IV

SOME ten miles off shore we fell in with a smart-looking schooner bound for Plymouth.

"That's Brandy-nose Tompkins from St. Michael with oranges," Yeardley observed.

Then came a hail, "Yeardley ahoy! Where bound?"

"South Pole, for oranges."

And back came a most uncomplimentary adieu, that occasioned much laughter among the men.

Five days later we were in the midst of a heavy south-wester, through which the cutter rode like a gull; but next morning there was seen a large vessel lying almost on her beam-ends. She was a long way to leeward, but the skipper had already made up his mind.

"Shake two reefs out o' the mains'l, boys," he sang out, and when that had been done, and the sail set, he again shouted, "Stand by, for'a'd."

"Ay, ay; let her slide."

Up went the helm. As the canvas felt the force of the wind the big boom surged heavily, and the craft lay down sharply on the bilge. Over his shoulder the skipper wistfully followed the movement of an ugly sea bearing down on the weather beam; but steadying the helm he laughed, "Bully maid!" as with a magnificent rush the splendid little cutter sped clear of the danger. In unchecked

violence the seas were breaking over the hull to leeward, and for several seconds at a time it was completely hidden in flying spray. Across her stern we rushed, and then lay head to wind under the lee. She was a broken-down steamer with a distress signal flying from her stump-foremast. Until we sang out there was no one visible, but then a man suddenly appeared at her after-hatchway. In a moment our fellows began to clear away the boat, and almost before I could speak she was in the water, and her crew of two hands were pulling for the wreck. As they reached her a tremendous wave broke over the weather side, and for a space we could see nothing of friends or strangers. But presently our little boat loomed through the flying spray, and one man got safely on board the unknown. One by one her crew slid from the hatchway, until the cockle-shell could hold no more, and they were safely placed on board the cutter. Six trips did that frail vessel make between ourselves and the stranger, till every soul was rescued; and with twelve extra mouths to fill, Yeardley bore away for Ferrol, where the wondering strangers were landed, and we took on board a fresh stock of vegetables, and then resumed the voyage. What became of the derelict we never knew. Anyhow, the weather soon became more settled. Day after day the cutter sped south; and one fine morning there was a beautiful silvery-hued column rising from the sea on our port bow.

"What is it?" Yeardley eagerly inquired.

"The Peak of Teneriffe, Tom," I said.

"Dear me! It is magnificent."

As it truly was; but of it, or, indeed, the ever-changing beauties of sea or sky the stolid-visaged

diver took no apparent heed. With pipe in mouth, and his hands sunk deep in his pockets, Barber would stand or loll about deck, no remark ever passing his lips, and showing no desire to make himself agreeable. But I had never been favourably impressed by the manner or appearance of our morose shipmate; and Yeardley and I determined to leave him quite free in his inclinations, since, as my friend once shrewdly observed, it was his diving apparatus that was chiefly needed.

The Peak faded in the mists astern. Through the steady trade-wind we daily kept our course, and forty-eight days after leaving Ferrol we crossed the Line. For some time previously we had been much concerned by the heavy growth of sea-weed adhering to every portion of the submerged hull, and had constantly striven to remove such as came within reach. Of course, we could not get down to the keel, and were therefore compelled to await arrival at Table Bay; but I almost dreaded the slow progress which the good little cutter was unable to surmount.

Shortly after we had struck the south-east trades, an exciting incident occurred.

One night I was aroused by the skipper. "Come on deck," said he; "for I am fairly puzzled over this light ahead."

I found the watch assembled at the bow.

"At first," Yeardley explained, "I thought it was a star; but it don't rise, and it's too bright for a ship's light."

Through the glass I examined the object. "It is a vessel on fire," I said.

In less than an hour we were half a mile a-weather of the ship, and a magnificent sight she proved. From

stem to stern she was burning furiously, and for miles round the sea was aglow. Of her crew we saw nothing; but she suddenly burst into an intense glare, and as suddenly disappeared, leaving our eyes blinded for a space by the intense light.

"Some coal-laden outward-bound vessel, most likely," I said. "Her crew has been picked up—we can do no more."

So the *Mary Jane* was brought upon the wind; but her further progress it would be tedious to detail. I am anxious to pass on to more exciting incidents, and will briefly state that after a monotonous six weeks' further sailing we reached Table Bay, where the hull was thoroughly cleansed of the "grass" clinging to every plank and seam.

My shipmates, however, were in excellent health and spirits. After a much-needed run on shore we took on board a quantity of fresh food and water, and then faced south in our final attempt to reach the Australian coast.

That portion of the voyage needs little description. Among the strong winds and seas of the "rolling forties" we saw neither land nor sail. Day after day the billows boomed their everlasting chant, while the majestically-wheeling albatrosses soared overhead, and the mast described great arcs across the zenith. Thus did the days lengthen into weeks, and the months come and go, but still the speeding cutter swept eastward toward the shores of Woody Bay and the treasure we had risked so much to obtain.

CHAPTER V

“LAND, O!”

Yes, there it lay all across the bow—a hazy-blue outline, rising over the sea-rim, and above it an unclouded sun scarce an hour old. No pen could describe the intense joy or the sudden relief from anxiety which the sight afforded. After nearly six months of suspense, and the cramped confinement of so small a vessel, every obstacle had been successfully overcome, till at length there appeared the coast-line of Australia. All privation, however, was forgotten in the cheer that broke from the men, who anxiously awaited the pleasures of being once again on shore.

We made a good land-fall.

As the coast-line assumed a more definite appearance we found ourselves slightly eastward of Moreton Bay, and when the anchor was dropped near the mouth of the Brisbane River, all hands speedily obtained a run on shore, and the needed diet of fresh food to drive off any signs of the dreaded scurvy. The cutter was careened, and her hull again thoroughly cleansed. Another stock of provisions and fresh water was shipped, and with them we sailed in quest of Woody Bay. During the following six weeks we held steadily on a north-easterly course, sailing merrily throughout the day, but coming to an anchor at sundown, so that by no possibility should the wreck of the *Gannet* be passed during the night.

One evening the cutter lay becalmed some six miles off the northern horn of Halifax Bay.

"We're not far off the gold now," Yeardley observed.

"Fifty miles, according to Burke's account," I said.

"Suppose some one's been already there?" Barber chimed in, and it was almost the first voluntary observation he had submitted since leaving home.

"Shut up!" cried the skipper hastily; "you're always croaking some foolish doubt."

"It's only what I'm thinking may have happened."

"You should have thought of it before shipping," Tom said.

As the calm continued we allowed the vessel to drift, but keen was the look-out for submerged coral reefs, or any obstacle likely to cause delay. With sun-up, there came a nice breeze that sent us spinning along the coast, toward which I hauled closer as the day advanced, keeping both log and lead in constant use. The skipper became much excited, and the telescope was never out of his hands. Indeed, the suppressed nervousness of all was visible in the keen eyes watching for any glimpse of the four trees which the old chart indicated as growing on the southern point of Woody Bay. And still the hours passed, and nothing of them was seen. The sun reached its highest altitude, and then dropped downward toward the sea. We were wondering if darkness would occasion another anchorage that night, but at forty-five minutes past four o'clock there suddenly rose from the deck a hearty cheer, as slowly there appeared off the port bow a low point, on which were growing—four large trees! As the farther coast-line was opened out we saw a long ridge of broken sea lying almost entirely across the mouth of a horseshoe-shaped bay, while between the

nearest end of that ridge and the four trees there was a deep blue channel leading into what we could not doubt was—Woody Bay.

“The brig’s gone!” cried the skipper.

“Washed over the reef,” I sang out, as climbing aloft I directed the best course, till, in three fathoms, the anchor was dropped, while ringing cheers echoed and re-echoed along the densely-wooded shore. But by that time the sun’s lower limb was under the horizon, and as in those latitudes there is little daylight after sunset, Yeardley and I deemed it advisable to postpone until morning any search for the sunken wreck. So the decks were cleared, and the canvas stowed, but so certain were we of ultimate success that tackles and a small derrick for hoisting in the gold were rigged and rove, and after a late supper we got on deck such gear as would be required for warping the cutter into a position over the lost brig next morning.

Never, surely, did any crew await with such intense but suppressed emotion the realisation of their thoughts and dreams. Within the next few hours the treasure would be found and raised, but although we were confident of success, no one save the diver could think of sleep. With the first show of returning daylight all hands were astir. Yeardley and I at once put off in the boat to take soundings at the reef. From an accurate knowledge of Burke’s chart a position corresponding with the star marked on it was quickly obtained. The first cast of the lead showed a depth of over ten fathoms, while the “arming,” or lump of grease placed in the cavity at the lower end of the weight, was covered with fine white sand. Succeeding casts showed much less

water—as though the lead had rested on jutting rock or *débris*, and once the grease brought up several small pieces of rotten wood. We had found the *Gannet*!

We returned to the cutter. After a hasty meal the vessel was towed into and moored over the allotted position. The diving apparatus was ready for use. The life and signal lines were cleared. Barber adjusted his indiarubber suit, the leaden weights were secured over his shoulders, and the helmet was screwed down. The air-pump handles revolved. The diver stood motionless as if testing his gear, and then touched the axe and knife at his side, and finally passed down the ladder into the sea and disappeared. Then we lowered him to the bottom, while bubbles rose swiftly to the surface. Once we received a signal for more air, but there ensued a considerable period of suspense. Our opinions respecting the delay differed. Some began to suggest an accident, while others opined that Barber had “struck it rich,” and was so excited as to have forgotten his position. In the midst of such conjectures we received the signal to “haul up.” Within the next few minutes the diver was on the deck and his helmet removed.

“What cheer, Joe?” cried the excited skipper.

“*There is no gold down there!*” was the sullen reply.

I looked at the man searchingly—was he telling the truth? That the treasure had been removed seemed impossible. It had evidently lain under water several years, and Burke declared that his companions had been drowned. Under such circumstances it was impossible to suppose that the gold could have been found by strangers, and a dark

suspicion crossed my mind. Was Barber deceiving us? Of his rectitude I had always entertained certain doubts, and it was clear that Yeardley likewise declined to accept his report. Thereupon I determined to expose the fraud.

"Where have you searched?" I inquired.

"Everywhere," Barber replied, "and I repeat that there is no gold down below. The only things I saw were rotten wood and a big shark. I won't go down again."

"Nonsense!" cried I. "Are you scared?"

"Will *you* go?"—sneeringly.

"Certainly; and will prove your words untrue. The gold *must* be there, and I'll soon find it."

With a mocking laugh Barber removed his diving-dress. His refusal to prosecute the search was annoying, and already I perceived how greatly it had damped the ardour of the crew. But as their spirits fell mine rose, and to them I spoke my mind freely, declaring that I had not sailed half round the world to be fooled by such talk out of a fortune. The shark yarn I believed was intended to scare us from searching the wreck, out of which the scheming diver had perhaps already removed the gold to some spot easily recognisable upon some future occasion, when the entire amount would become his own.

"You surely don't intend to face the shark?" Yeardley remarked, with evident concern.

"In that yarn," I replied, "there's as much truth as that the gold is gone. Anyhow, skipper, I know how to face any such danger, and I mean to find the treasure."

"Suppose there's an accident—who's going to sail our vessel? I won't consent to such a risk."

"But I'll go all the same. Do you think I brought you all out on a wild-geese chase?"

And thereupon I secured two tough-wood broom-handles, which were sawn into lengths of about two feet; and each piece was then pointed at either end. They were to act as gags for the sharks. A half-breed Mexican had once described how such weapons were used on the terrible man-eaters of the Californian Gulf, and he assured me that when handled with courage they never failed to afford time for escape. I got into the diving-dress, and directed the skipper to personally attend my signals.

Within the next few minutes I was standing on the bottom, which was much more distinct than I had supposed possible at a depth of sixty feet. The cause was soon apparent. The wreck lay on an almost white sand-bed. Here and there still remained in position a massive rib, or beam on her outer side, while over all rose like a snow-white cliff the coral reef, which reflected the sun's rays.

Near the stern I found the crowbar which Barber had brought down, and with it began a prompt examination of the *débris*. There was everywhere around plain proof of Barber's search, and that he had not overlooked any spot likely to conceal the treasure. But I could find nothing. Suddenly, I remembered how the mutineers had carried the gold into the fore-castle. Round the bow my work commenced, and it was not long before a large beam was forced aside, and under that was found a human skeleton. Harder still the work proceeded, but beyond that 'gruesome sight there was nothing visible, save rotting planks and timbers.

Perhaps Barber had removed the gold to some position under the reef?

I stepped from the wreck. Some distance away I made a sufficiently startling discovery. On the sandy bottom there were scattered several pieces of wood, and to some of them there still adhered thin strips of iron, similar to those one sees fastened round the ends of heavy specie boxes. That discovery filled me with a stronger suspicion of Barber's deceit, till presently I found that the sand was entirely undisturbed save where I myself had trodden. And then I found a specie-box almost uninjured, and within it lay a hammer and two short iron levers, which I knew my predecessor had not brought down! That revelation nearly unmanned me. There could no longer be any doubt respecting the discovery by strangers of the gold, and that hammer and other implements proved that the gold had been raised from where I stood!

Thereupon I determined to return to the surface. When about retracing my steps I came almost face to face with a great shark. The ugly creature did not appear to notice me, and slowly passed by. But I felt assured he would return, and that did I give the signal to "haul up," I should, most probably, be seized at a moment when least able to resist the attack. While hastening for shelter in the wreck the shark was seen approaching, and one of the gags was instantly seized. It was to be for me a matter of life or death, and I braced myself for the ordeal. The enemy drew nearer. The huge body grew distinct, and the horrible eyes seemed fixed in a dreadful fascination. With a swift inclination the mass suddenly turned on its side, the jaws fell apart—my

opportunity had arisen. The next moment my hand was within the mouth. The pointed stick was set firmly between those rows of saw-like teeth, and then flinging myself upon the sand I barely escaped the swirl of the powerful tail, as the shark rushed past. The next moment I had reached the old brig. But my antagonist had not done with me. With frightful rapidity the fury-blinded monster resumed the attack, and evidently intending to crush me by sheer weight he passed over the very spot on which I had just stood, and with the speed of an express-train he pulverised his ugly head against the reef.

The tail of the shark lay within three feet of where I stood. It was motionless, so I prepared to make good my retreat. In doing so I now perceived that my left arm was entangled in some substance not unlike a stout piece of sea-weed. While striving to detach it, I saw two large protruding eyes glaring from the depths of a heap of rotting wood. Between them an inverted parrot-like beak moved rapidly, while above it several snake-like arms swayed over my helmet. I had been attacked by a large poulp! The knife at my side was immediately seized, and the tentacle adhering to my dress was severed. Vain attempt! Instantly the enraged creature flung across the helmet its remaining arms. I was being dragged head foremost off my feet, but getting my knees to bear against a beam of wood, I seized the axe, and buried it in the head of the foe, but was immediately enveloped in complete darkness, for the creature had discharged over me the inky fluid provided by nature for its escape.

At last I was free to return to my friends, and my feelings may be readily imagined. Upon them

all I had brought complete ruin. The treasure for which they had risked their lives had already been discovered, and removed. What could I offer or say to those awaiting my return? I had been beggared by the miserable failure, and something very like disaster stared us in the face.

Anyhow, I felt that the sooner the truth was known the sooner would some plan of escape be devised, and with beating heart I gave the signal to "haul up."

I soon stood on the deck, but the sudden return to a condition of natural existence proved overwhelming, for no sooner was the helmet removed than I fell into the arms of the skipper and remembered no more.

CHAPTER VI

WHEN consciousness returned I was in a hammock in the cabin, and beside it the skipper appeared.

"How do 'ee feel?" he gently inquired.

"Tired, Tom. How long have I been here?"

"Nearly a week," he said. "This is Christmas Day."

And then in all its crushing intensity the knowledge of our position crossed my mind—a position so serious that I knew not what to say or think. By my advice the whole ship's company had been lured from home and friends in search of—what? A bubble, a golden will-o'-the-wisp, which for months had drawn us half round the world only to cause intense mental anxiety as could never be forgotten.

"Yeadley," I cried, "I have ruined you all; there is no gold in the wreck."

"Steady, mate," he replied, and laid a hand quietly on my arm. "We know there isn't, because you've been talking of nothing else since the accident."

"What happened?"

"You stayed down too long; but you'll be all right now, please God. See here," he added, "I ain't going to talk any more—have a sleep."

I turned on my side and slept. I felt so refreshed on waking that next day they carried me on deck, and within a week my strength was almost restored. At my request Yeardley called the hands aft.

"Men," said I, "we've had a terrible disappointment; but let us keep cool heads and talk the matter over quietly."

"Talking won't fill our pockets; you've deceived us all," Barber angrily observed.

"If you say that again," cried the skipper in great wrath, "I'll drive my fist down your throat—the man has lost all he had."

"But the brig's been under water several years," Barber sullenly replied, "so how could any one know of the gold? There never was any."

"'Twas found while the vessel was on the reef, you idiot!" Tom said.

"No, Yeardley," I remarked. "It was raised from below, for there I found the broken specie boxes and the tools with which they were opened."

For some minutes no one spoke. Then the skipper said—

"It seems strange; but I don't believe any white man could carry on such work at such a depth."

"No," said I; "but the discoverer of the gold was probably assisted by Kanakas."

"What are they?"

"South Sea Islanders, Tom. They swim and dive like fishes."

"That would mean a long job, eh?"

"Perhaps several months."

Yeardley leapt to his feet. "Let's go ashore," said he.

"What for?"

"They must have been living somewhere along the bay, and we might discover some trace of where they went. See here, mates," he added, "we are best entitled to that missing treasure. The man as put it on the reef yonder left us a clean letter of introduction, so to say, in his rough chart, and along the beach we might find a clue to the mystery."

A cry of relief broke from the men.

"Ay, ay, skipper," cried they. "We'll do as you think best; it won't cost much, anyhow." And with that, half of them dropped into the boat. When she returned every soul save Barber soon stood on the narrow beach dividing the thickly-timbered hillsides from the sea. Then we ranged ourselves into regular "watches." It was agreed that while Yeardley and his men searched along the southern shore, I and my side should proceed in the opposite direction. Not a parting word was uttered. The skipper knew as well as I what a hopeless quest it meant, but it was really intended as an outlet for the pent-up disappointment so apparent on the faces of the crew.

With eagerness the search began. In every direction my fellows poked among the roots and thick scrub. Of them I took slight heed, since my mind was filled with the gravity of the position, and the men were almost forgotten. Anyhow, in about an

hour I found myself alone, and almost at the northern point of the bay. There the beach widened into a strip of about three fathoms, and my attention was suddenly attracted by a peculiar-looking mark that extended from the sea straight across my path, until it ended near a clump of scrub inshore. It seemed as though a small burrowing animal had tunnelled its way through the sand, and that in its passage it had thrown up a tiny mound, an inch or so high. My curiosity being aroused, I gave the ridge a kick—the mystery was at once explained. At my feet a small rusty chain was laid bare. Its whole length had at one time been visible, but in the course of several years the action of wind and sea had completely covered it with sand. I followed it up to the clump of scrub. Beneath the latter I discovered that the chain was attached to a large iron ring, under which an anchor stock was visible. The discovery was startling, but it also proved how accurate had been the opinions of the skipper. I turned to seek my companions, but the seaman Bill was alone visible. I shouted, and he came on the run.

“There’s a chain!” cried he breathlessly.

Where the beach ended and the loam began we presently made a second discovery when the man picked up a large crowbar.

“This is becoming warm,” I said.

“Bet your boots on that, sir,” he replied, “and for all-round long-headedness the skipper beats all I ever knew.”

As we began to mount the hillside it at once became apparent why that end of the bay was used as a landing-place. It was much less thickly timbered than any other portion, and one saw how difficult it

would have been to clear a road through the trees and thick undergrowth which everywhere else came quite close down to the sea. But here we had a comparatively clear road leading toward the summit, and with a keen look-out for strangers we soon gained the top of the hill. From thence a splendid view of the beautifully wooded bay was obtainable, while beyond the thin white ridge lay the deep blue sea sparkling under the unclouded sun. Every step down the farther slope occasioned intense surprise. Here and there we picked up several pieces of decaying rope, a few rusted nails with a broken-handled pickaxe, and a shovel, and last, but by no means least, a broken-stemmed, black-coloured clay pipe. That we were approaching the camp of those who had discovered the treasure there could be no doubt. The thought suddenly occurred to me that should the men we had left behind start shouting at us, any strangers within earshot might become alarmed and obstruct further investigations. So I ordered my companion to return, and direct his mates to remain quiet until we rejoined them.

"Am I to come back, sir?" Bill inquired.

"Certainly; and bear a hand."

When left alone I sat down and carefully loaded my revolver. Then rising, and keeping under the shelter of the scrub on my right I passed quietly down the hillside. At a distance of some fifty fathoms from the summit I came suddenly on a dilapidated shanty erected under the trees. Within or about it was not any sign of moving beings. Not a leaf stirred upon the trees. The sun shone brilliantly, but through the chimney or any portion of the hut no smoke appeared, and over all rested

an ominous silence. To guard against any sudden assault I dropped on hands and knees, and in that position I crawled to the back of the shanty. Against its weather-beaten side I pressed an ear and listened for the slightest movement. Nothing stirred. Then gaining confidence I worked round toward the doorway and looked in. Every article was clearly defined in the strong light, but what was seen instantly filled me with speechless dread. I was as though mesmerised, and unable to move hand or foot. Open-mouthed I gazed on the dreadful and yet fascinating spectacle, till, presently, I began to realise its awful truth, and rising to my feet I fled up the hillside. On the summit I met the returning sailor.

"What's the matter?" inquired he anxiously.

Without thought of replying I seized his wrist, and dragged him to the hut door. "Look!" I whispered.

He raised his hands to shade his eyes. As his mind took in the weird reality he began to tremble. "My God!" he muttered solemnly, and then he dropped on his knees.

In the centre of the hut there was stocked *a solid square of gold*, and round that square there lay upon the hard earthen floor the ghastly outlines of six human skeletons!

Perhaps the depth of our agitation, or the shock sustained in coming so unexpectedly on such a spectacle, may more readily be imagined than described! As for myself, it would be impossible to explain, and as feeble to deny, the overwhelming sense of relief following our discovery. Before us stood the treasure for which our lives had been risked. Little more than an hour

previously, and in presence of the whole crew, Joseph Barber had charged me with deception, and save the voice of the skipper none other was raised in my defence. But, *now*, all that was past. No longer, *now*, could suspicion rest upon my actions, and every man would soon receive his full share of the fortunate discovery.

A careful examination of the interior of the hut soon convinced us that the six unhappy creatures whose remains we saw had been slowly starved to death where they lay. Not the least particle of food could anywhere be found. Indeed, save the treasure, and its gruesome custodians, the shanty was quite empty. Between two bars of gold on the top of the square, however, I discovered a small book nearly filled with writing traced in lead, and that I pocketed for future examination.

"Come," said I, "let us get back to the beach;" and there our mates quietly awaited our arrival. I signed to the sailor, Bill, that reticence was needed, and so all returned to the spot whence we had started, and found the skipper and his men in a very dejected mood.

"Ay, ay," the skipper said. "I see you've had no more luck than me—let's get aboard." As the men tailed off down the beach, I took him aside.

"Can you bear good news, Tom?" I inquired, and he turned upon me somewhat roughly.

"Don't play the fool, man!" he said. "There's none."

"But there *is*," said I excitedly, "and if you will come I shall show you."

He thought I was mad—I saw that in his eyes. Sailor Bill, however, now sang out that what I said was the truth, and the next moment we were all

racing along the northern beach like boys released from school.

What need to describe their joy and horror of the spectacle within the hut? We dug a long trench, and in it reverently placed the human remains, while praying that no such end might be ours. After that Yeardley and his men hurried on board, and towed the cutter close to the northern beach. Meanwhile, my crowd demolished the falling shanty, and afterwards started the removal of the gold toward the sea. The fierce sun fell under the horizon, and a beautiful silver moon helped us much, but not until the last boat-load of the treasure had been fairly set afloat did we cease operations.

CHAPTER VII

It was close upon midnight before all hands were again assembled on board the cutter, and the gold safely stowed in her hold. As may be imagined, the men were in a highly excited condition following our unexpected good fortune, and never had I seen them so entirely happy. Even the skipper seemed an altered man. In a jovial shout he called us all on deck, and as a preliminary to "opening the ball" served out all round a plug of tobacco, so that they might sit and enjoy a smoke. The sailor Bill thereupon tuned up his fiddle, that had oftentimes cheered us on the voyage out, and it may safely be affirmed that never before had the beautiful little bay resounded to such music, or the laughter, songs, and cheers of happier men. When at length the

merrymaking died away, and the skipper and I were seated in the cabin, I handed him the little book which had been discovered in the falling shanty. After a hasty overhaul of the leaves, he settled comfortably in his chair. "The first entry," he said, "is dated June twenty-fifth, eighteen-fifty-eight."

"That's something over four years ago," I said.

"And the probable age of the remains," he added.

"Read the contents, Tom," said I, and thereupon he obliged me, and began what I have named—

"JIM CRONIN'S LOG."

"*June 25, 1858.*—On that date, twelve months ago, I, James Cronin, first heard of the gold now stacked within this shanty. I was sheep-tending, and that day a half-starved sailor struck my hut, and told how, some four years previously, a brig was lost on the coast, and that until quite recently he had been wandering through the bush in fruitless attempts to reach a white settlement. He also stated that a large quantity of gold had been in the vessel, and that all her crew were drowned. I became interested, and presently discovered that the vessel had struck upon a reef some fifty miles north of Halifax Bay, but she was in deep water. Thereupon, I decided to share the secret with my chum at the station. The exhausted sailor did not long survive, for before assistance could be procured he died in my hut. So with my chum I made tracks for the coast. In Moreton Bay we found a vessel that sold us a small boat, and in her we sailed for the wreck, which was found under the reef running across this bay. My chum stripped

and dived, but—that was the last I ever saw of him. Being unable to prosecute the search, I sailed for the big bay farther south, and there met two whites and six Kanakas pearl-fishing. I told them of the treasure, and we all returned to the reef. The niggers presently found the gold, and raised every bar of it. The two boats, however, were not large enough to carry all the crews and the specie at one trip; and as by that time our stock of grub was running very low, it was agreed that while two whites and one nigger went south for provisions and a larger craft, the remaining hands should build a hut and await the return of the friends.

“So the gold was housed in this shanty, and the stock of provisions was divided. That explanation now brings me down twelve months later, for upon

“*June 14, 1859.*—The boat sailed south for provisions.

“*June 16, 1859.*—Last night a terrific storm burst over this coast. Our boat was dashed to atoms on the beach, and everything in her swept away. Should our friends have been caught unawares I dread to think what our position here may become. No one save those gone south is aware of our situation, and the coast is almost unknown. We will, however, hope for a speedy release.

“*July 13, 1859.*—The boat has been gone one month to-day, and as yet there has been no sign of her return. Our position has become serious. The food supply has run so low that we are reduced to one biscuit per man, per day. The men are becoming so disheartened that I almost fear a mutiny at any moment, but they know I am armed. We could not hope in our weakened condition to force a passage overland, and while

any chance of seeing the boat remains we do not care to abandon the treasure.

"August 16, 1859.—Still alive, but no sign of our returning friends—they must have been lost at sea. Two of the Kanakas died last night. We are reduced almost to skeletons, and are only surviving on a few biscuit-crumbs a day. I begin to fear the worst, and the niggers have become dangerous, and almost insane.

"September 1, 1859.—During a desperate fight this morning two of the Kanakas were killed, and the last is so seriously injured he cannot live many hours. We are now entirely without food.

"September 2, 1859.—Alone—boat not——"

At that point in the narrative Yeardley stopped reading, and with a deep sigh he put the book aside. "There isn't any more, mate," he said. "Poor chaps! they had an awful time, but we know, now, how the gold was found." He had scarcely concluded when we heard the heavy footsteps of Barber descending the stairs, and with a somewhat defiant manner he accosted me. "Look here," he said, "what are 'ee going to do about this yere gold-find?"

"What do you mean?" I inquired.

"I mean," said he, and apparently worked himself into a violent temper, "that the six thousand pounds you offered for finding the gold was intended as a fourth share, wasn't it?"

"We said nothing about a share," I replied, and now began to partly understand what was intended. "You agreed to accept six thousand on the chance of raising the gold, and that you will receive at Sydney."

"But I never accepted anything less than a fourth share. You said the six thousand represented that portion, but the recovered treasure must be double that in value, and so I dare say you two intend to pocket the difference?"

"You will receive what you agreed to accept," I returned, "and nothing more."

"You've nothing to prove I accepted anything but a share, and that I mean to have, or——"

"Will you threaten me aboard my vessel?" cried the skipper indignantly.

"I'm telling 'ee straight off what I mean to have," Barber defiantly returned, "and it'll be the worse for 'ee if I don't."

Yeardley snapped his fingers. "I don't care *that* for your threats," cried he, "but if 'ee begin any tampering of my crew I'll crack yer neck."

"I want a proper agreement drawn up."

"You'd best go on deck," the skipper said.

"Not until I have what I want," was the defiant reply, and with that Yeardley leaped over the table, capsized the swinging lamp on to the deck, and all were instantly left in complete darkness. The next moment I heard Barber bellowing for mercy, while the voice of the skipper rose high above the tumult. "Ye want a signed paper, do 'ee?" he cried. "I'll sign 'ee, no mistake. *That*, you sneaking rascal," and a heavy blow resounded on the ribs of his victim, "is for your insult to my friend yesterday morning. And that and *that* is in payment for present mutiny, and if 'ee don't get on deck I'll crack every bone in yer carcass."

By that time I had found and re-lit the lamp, and the last I saw of the diver he was being hauled

on deck by the skipper, and finally flung outward, where the baffled man cursed, and swore vengeance on all hands.

"By gum!" cried the skipper fiercely, "but the very first settlement we sight I'll put that ruffian and his gear ashore."

"And he quite deserves it," I said, "but I am not at all surprised."

Such was the closing scene in that memorable day. With its dawn we fully believed that a serious disaster had overtaken all hands, while by mid-day we had discovered such a treasure as would make us all rich men, and by midnight the vessel had been nearly set ablaze by the scheming designs of our diver.

And yet we knew not what was to follow. Had any one on board been enabled to foresee the consequences following that disturbance, we might have been somewhat prepared to struggle against the terrible catastrophe.

CHAPTER VIII

FOR want of wind next morning we had the cutter towed out of the bay. In the offing she lay becalmed, but certain indications foretold an approaching breeze. Since the previous night the barometer had been steadily falling; and that warning determined us to await in the open what might befall, rather than remain within the confined anchorage of the bay.

Behind a dense, stagnant opacity that turned the deep blue of the ocean to a greasy, leaden-hued

expanse, the sun was completely hidden, and even the coast-line was but dimly visible through the heavy, overhanging gloom. Not a breath of air helped to steady the constant, and at times severe rolling of the cutter. Anyhow, we knew that whatever was in store we were fully prepared to meet. The mainsail was reefed, the top-mast housed, and extra lashings passed on the boat or other movable gear about deck.

Shortly after supper a faint breeze quickly started a ripple under the bow. The canvas then filled steadily, and by eight o'clock she was ripping along with sheets of spray under her nose.

The course was set, and then the skipper turned in.

"Let her sing now," said he, "but don't strain the stick—she's been idle lately."

It so happened that the man Bill was at the helm, and I spoke to him. "What do you think of our luck?"

"Well, sir," he said, "the old hands are satisfied, but that growling old diver and the two new fellows are constantly whispering, and nodding their heads in a way I don't fancy."

"Have you heard anything?"

"Not much, sir, but last night after Barber came for'a'd from the cabin, he up an' swore afore all hands as how he'd have his revenge of you. I'd keep an eye lifting, sir."

"Thanks," I said. "I am prepared, and do not fear him."

"'Twas only honest to tell 'ee," Bill replied.

Both wind and sea were rapidly increasing, but as the former was well off the beam, the vessel did not feel inconvenienced, and was tearing along in splendid

style. At the midnight relief, however, the skipper determined to close-reef down, and when that had been done, and the helm relieved, he and I went below to prick off the position on the chart. While thus engaged, there was a peculiar noise heard overhead, and not feeling satisfied, Yeardley and I immediately proceeded on deck. When the skipper reached the top of the stairs he was almost knocked backward, so severely did his head strike the sliding door of the scuttle, which was secured on the outer side. Our gravest suspicions were aroused. And to increase the anxiety, a howling squall suddenly laid the cutter almost upon her beam-ends.

"On deck — open this door!" shouted my friend.

There was no response. Then the skipper doubled himself up across the hatch, and with a single kick he drove out the after panel of the covering. "Come along," he cried furiously. "She'll capsize!"

But the loud menace of the diver checked our progress.

"If 'ee dar' to come out," cried he, "I'll bash your brains on the deck. Will you agree to divide the gold?"

The infuriated skipper was about forcing a passage, and only by the merest accident did he escape the handspike which Barber aimed at his head.

The wind was tearing through the shattered scuttle, and the sea swirled in great white wisps half across the deck. On my ear fell the warm breath of my friend, and then the words—"Your revolver—quick!"

Swish! A blinding glare, and then a crash that shook the cutter to her keel. Nature's artillery had

been let loose, and in an appalling discharge it rent the heaven with forked death.

I gave the skipper my revolver. Through the shattered woodwork he instantly thrust his coat, and on it the handspike fell. Then the weapon flashed, and a piercing cry was followed by some one falling on the deck. Again and again Yeardley's feet smote the scuttle till scarce a splinter remained, and then we leaped outward.

The vessel was almost capsized, and how the stick or the canvas held was a mystery.

From the tiller Yeardley drove the fellow steering. "All hands shorten sail!"

Swish, swish! Ocean, sky, and vessel stood depicted in fierce noonday glare. The straining cutter trembled in every seam, as along her deck a mighty roar of thunder passed, and then—utter darkness.

"All hands on deck!"

I answered the cry, and dragged myself forward by the weather rail. I could see no one moving. In a state of great anxiety I reached the fore-scuttle—it was barred down on the outer side.

In a frenzy of passion I tore at the fastenings, and dashed against the panels my heavily-booted feet, while below me there arose the angry voices of the imprisoned seamen. Amid my most strenuous exertions there suddenly fell upon the vessel an intensely brilliant light, and while glancing upward I saw distinctly a large ball of fire strike the masthead, and then it seemed to fall at my very feet, as with a tremendous report it burst in all directions over the hull. What immediately followed I cannot accurately state. Indeed, it appeared that for a space my senses had

been paralysed. But by degrees a peculiar feeling grew within my mind—a feeling impossible of description, yet a fast-increasing dread, that a terrible calamity—as yet unknown—had befallen me.

I looked for the outlines of the hatch to which I still clung, or those of the mast, or the sails close at hand—all was a perfect blank. Ah, but then the night was so intensely dark that even the nearest objects were almost invisible! But, suddenly, another deafening thunder-burst smote sea and ship, and with a horrible dread I knew it had been preceded by a flash which had not been seen.

I had been struck blind!

In an agony of despair I beat my hands upon the scuttle. Before further assistance could, however, be rendered to those below, I felt that the cutter had fallen into the trough of the sea, which once almost washed me away. There arose not far off a hoarse cry. Almost instantly a strong hand gripped my collar, and then my would-be rescuer, the vessel, and all hands were overwhelmed by a rush of roaring sea. Still gripped by the powerful hand, I was dragged downward till the breath seemed nearly pressed from the lungs; and then a sudden release from the intolerable weight, while in my face beat wildly the wind and the flying spume.

“Look out, there’s the boat!” It was the voice of the skipper.

My hand struck a hard object, and to it I clung.

“Yeardley!”

“Hullo!—day’s breaking.”

“I’m blind. Where’s the cutter?”

“Sunk!”

CHAPTER IX

CLINGING to the water-logged boat, the skipper and I anxiously awaited what fate might befall. As daylight strengthened I began to see dimly the outlines of our frail support, as also those of my companion's burly form close at hand. We could not, however, succeed in ridding the boat of any appreciable quantity of water, since the waves still ran high and frustrated any such attempt. But it quickly became apparent that the storm had broken its fury. When several hours had passed, Yeardley at length succeeded in bailing out with his boot a large amount of water from the little vessel, and when a favourable opportunity arose he almost lifted me in over her stern. "Now, then," said he, "you peg away at the bailing, and I'll be soon alongside of you;" and he was.

"You haven't seen anything of the cutter or her crew, skipper?"

"Not as much as a rope-yarn," he said. "She went to the bottom like a stone."

"What happened?" inquired I. "After that last crash I must have been stunned, for I cannot clearly recall anything."

"It took her in the belly o' the mains'l, and seemed to strike the deck close by you—I believe it went through her. Anyhow, with the canvas gone from clew to earing, I lost control, and the sea broke in over the stem, and poured down the hatch, which I'd kicked to pieces. I knew it was a matter of only five minutes' grace. So 'twas out knife, slash

through the boat-lashings, and then for'a'd where you lay on the scuttle. See, now," he continued, "you must keep a good heart over the accident. I have known a whole crew to be blinded in just such a way, and they all recovered after a time."

"And this is the result of all our anxiety," I said; "the crew, the cutter, and the treasure all sacrificed to the avarice of one man."

"I don't know so much about that," Yeardley thoughtfully replied. "It seems to me that there never could have been any benefit gained from stuff stained by the blood of murdered men."

"You are right, skipper, and even the discoverers of it all died. Anyhow, friend, one matter is certain—you cannot be held responsible for what has occurred."

"No, mate, and if we'd been on deck ten minutes sooner, I believe I'd have hauled her through. Well, the Lord has spared us in a wonderful way. Keep your heart strong, lad, and who knows but we may get safely ashore and discover my son."

"Ay, ay, you told me about his leaving home. How long has he been out here?"

"About eight years, I reckon."

And almost immediately I heard a strange, half-stifled cry escape from his throat.

"What's the matter, skipper?" I hastily inquired.

"Wait—let me make sure," he said excitedly. "Ay, it is—it is—*Sail, O!*"

The last words were shouted in a stentorian cry. He had been standing upright, and could only now and again see the stranger as we rose upon the crests of the waves.

"How far off is she, skipper?"

"About three miles," he said, "but she's looming larger all the time, although the breeze is falling so fast."

"Ay, it's passed almost as suddenly as it came. Do you think they will see us, skipper?"

"We'll make them," he returned. "Here, mate, grip my arm—so. Now, stand on the thwart and take off your coat—together, lad."

While thus striving to attract attention, Yeardley cried out, "She's a biggish sloop. Hullo! there goes aloft her white ensign. She's a Johnny Haultaut"—by which he meant a man-o'-war.

"Surveying along the coast, most likely," I said.

"Hurrah! they see us, mate. Keep up your heart, for there she flies into the wind, and the boat will be alongside presently."

And sure enough I soon heard oars moving, and then with a hearty greeting the strangers came alongside. "Been long adrift?" they inquired.

"Since the gale last night," returned the skipper. "We have lost our vessel and the whole crew."

"Reckon you don't want that cockle-shell?" an officer inquired, and without delay Yeardley helped me on board the larger vessel, and thus was abandoned the last remnant of our ill-fated attempt to recover the treasure in Woody Bay.

The skipper briefly narrated the loss of the cutter, and how I had become almost sightless. Within a few minutes we were assisted on board H.M.S. *Dido*, a large sloop returning to Sydney after a lengthened surveying cruise in Torres Straits, and from every one on board we received the greatest kindness.

Under the care of her surgeon my eyesight steadily improved, so that by the time we reached Port Jackson I was enabled to get about deck without assistance.

In due course we reached our destination, and having returned our heartfelt thanks to those who rendered us such timely aid, we were landed on Sydney quay, with exactly two golden coins remaining from our combined savings invested in the struggle to discover the gold lying in the wreck of the *Gannet*.

From one of the crew on board the sloop, Yeardley had obtained the address of a boarding-house in the old Australian city, and there we determined to stay until employment could be found.

After some inquiry we reached the street in which it was situated, and on turning the corner the skipper was almost capsized by collision with a fine-looking young man, attired in a flannel shirt, broad-brimmed felt hat, and trousers tucked into a pair of high boots that reached his knees.

"Beg pardon, mate," the stranger cheerily observed. "Couldn't avoid it—new chums, eh?"

"No harm done, sonny," Yeardley replied. "Can you tell me where is Collins's boarding-house?"

"Number fifty-six—opposite side," the stranger returned, and then suddenly gripped the skipper's shoulders, while gazing intently in his face.

"I am almost certain," the young fellow said deliberately, "that you are the very man I have been seeking since last week; and yet I *know* the vessel is not in the harbour."

"You have made a mistake," Yeardley replied, suspiciously, and immediately drew away.

"Well," returned the stranger, "that remains to

be proved. If I have I shall ask pardon. Will you answer me a simple question?"

"Certainly."

"Is your name Thomas Yeardley?"

"It is; but I never set eyes on you in my life," the skipper replied, in great astonishment.

"My name is George Conyngham," the young man returned, "and if you will step into the hotel opposite, you may hear something interesting."

We followed him into the house, and were soon seated in a private room, with pipes alight. After a somewhat awkward silence, the skipper suddenly smote his thigh, and then eagerly exclaimed, "I understand what you mean. You know my son, Jack, who is in this country. Isn't that so?"

"It is," the young man replied.

"Do you know where he is living?"

"Certainly. His luck has been something neither of us could even understand—you'd scarcely believe me if I told you."

"Made money?" the skipper remarked.

"You may safely bet every penny you have on *that*," Conyngham returned. "Your son, sir, is, or rather will one day become, the wealthiest man in the Colony."

"Nonsense!" Yeardley hastily replied. "I'm too old for bait of that kind."

Conyngham laughed cheerily. "Didn't I tell you," he cried. "Haven't I just said you wouldn't believe? but upon my honour, sir, it is true."

"Well, tell me the yarn," Yeardley observed.

"Just the outlines of his career," the other replied, "and should you need further proof, you must go to Luneville—his headquarters—and inter-

view himself. He and I came out in the same ship, and until four years ago we worked together. One day we struck a big station, and asked for a job. The master was an extraordinary-looking old man; he had the eye of a hawk, and a splendid white beard that covered his chest. He seemed about ninety years old, but was as nimble on his feet as a man at half that age.

“‘Looking for work?’ he inquired, and sent through us a glance that might disturb a bush-ranger.

“‘Yes, sir,’ I said, and then he asked my name, which was given.

“‘And yours?’ he continued, turning to my chum.

“‘Jack Yeardley, sir.’

“‘Jack *what*?’ the old man hastily inquired, and thinking he was deaf, Jack spoke louder.

“‘Where were you born?’ the master added, and my friend replied that it was at a fishing village in Devonshire, but he had mostly lived with his father at Plymouth.”

“Wilson—that was the master’s name—said nothing more, but he kept on looking at my chum in a curious manner. We were set to work, but it wasn’t long before I could see that Jack had dropped on a good billet, for the way old Wilson took to him was something astonishing, and Jack himself could make nothing of it.

“Well, to shorten the yarn, Jack Yeardley soon became manager of Luneville station, and what is more surprising, he became engaged to Wilson’s only daughter. After that promotion Jack and I were parted, and I presently left the locality in search of luck at a new gold mine farther west. Anyhow, I

have since heard a good deal about Wilson. That man, sir, owns whole streets in this city of Sydney. He has enormously valuable properties in Melbourne, Geelong, and Adelaide, to say nothing of several big sheep-runs other than Luneville. Who he is, or where he came from no one knows, but all his hands are well looked after, and they think much more highly of him than of the Governor-General. That is the yarn of your son's progress out here," Conyngham concluded, "and now I can continue my smoke."

For some minutes the skipper made no sign. At length he turned to me. "I never knew any one named Wilson," he said, "and how a stranger could thus take to my boy I cannot understand. I wonder if it can really be Jack?"

"It was your great resemblance to him," Conyngham replied, "that arrested my attention just now. And, by the way," he added hastily, while producing a pocket-book, "I had almost forgotten Jack's last letter received just before I arrived in the town. See here," and he handed Tom a directed letter. "Read that, sir, will you?"

The skipper read aloud the contents:—

"LUNEVILLE, *January 2, 1863.*

"DEAR GEORGE,—I was pleased to hear you are doing so well. You will not be surprised to learn that Mary Wilson has become my wife, and that there is a young Jack Yeardley beginning to toddle round the station. My father-in-law is as happy as a boy, but to this day I have failed to understand his reasons for taking me up—it is a mystery. By your letter

just received you seem to be travelling to Sydney. I cannot possibly go there just now, so I wish you would do me a favour. Some months back I wrote home asking my father to come out here, and settle down comfortably for the rest of his days. By the last English mail I have had my letter returned, and with it the strange news that Thomas Yeardley had already sailed for Australia on board his cutter, *Mary Jane*. Should he reach these shores it will be little short of a miracle. Anyhow, George, there *may* be the off chance of his reaching Sydney, and should you be able to trace him, I would feel grateful if you would tell him who you are, and where I am. With kind regards from self and wife,

“Yours ever,

“JACK YEARDLEY.

“P.S.—Come and see us first chance.

“GEORGE CONYNGHAM, Esq.”

“Do you believe me *now*?” Conyngham inquired, and the skipper seized his hand.

“Is Luneville far off?” I inquired.

“About two hundred miles.”

“How long would it take to walk that?” my friend asked thoughtfully.

“You wouldn’t do it in a month of Sundays,” Conyngham replied, and the skipper looked at me.

“We have lost the *Mary Jane*,” I said, “and have very little money.”

“That’s nothing,” our companion returned. “You can have what is needed, and Jack and I will arrange all accounts,” and thereupon the subject was dis-

cussed. Conyngham brought us new clothes; he took us down town to see the sights, and with him we returned to his boarding-house, and turned in.

CHAPTER X

DESPITE the luxury of "all night below" in a comfortable bed ashore, Yeardley and I were early astir next morning. George Conyngham we soon discovered was already out-of-doors, and shortly before breakfast he returned, looking fresh and bright after his walk down town.

"I've been to the coach-office," he said, "and find a conveyance leaves for Luneville at noon. I have purchased tickets for all three, as I know 'the ropes' of the voyage better than you, and I'd like to see my old chum."

The announcement was not altogether satisfactory to me. Why should he or his friend pay for my journey through the country; or why thrust myself upon people I had never seen? As for the skipper, he had, of course, a definite object in taking the cruise, but I had no such inducement, and therefore spoke clearly my opinion.

"What!" cried Yeardley, in evident alarm. "Would 'ee abandon me in a strange land?"

"No," said I, "but I cannot see why your son should pay for my amusement."

"That's all rubbish," Conyngham hastily observed. "You know it would never do to leave your friend at such a time. Come to Luneville, and after the skipper is settled down there you could return to my

place, where I guarantee constant work. Will you do that ? ”

Yeardley listened attentively. His hands were deeply sunk in his pockets, and his legs were set wide across the hearth-rug. “By gum !” cried he decisively, “but if you won’t come quietly, I’ll drag ’ee there, in spite of all—d’ye hear, mate ? ”

“After such a threat,” said I, “there is but one course left open—I submit,” and thereupon the brave skipper seized and pressed my hand. At the appointed hour we took seats in the stern-galleries of the coach. The passengers climbed on board. The coachman took his place, and the ribbons, and flicking with his whip the ear of the starboard leader, the “Flying Cloud” began her long voyage up-country.

Among the company Conyngham quickly made himself at home. With many he had several topics to discuss. His cigar-case was passed freely among the men, while his box of lucifer matches went the round generally, and thus all hands were speedily upon the best of terms with ourselves and our conductor.

The road was in capital condition for several miles beyond Sydney, and the coach rattled merrily on its course. After a time, however, the highway became rougher, and finally sank to the level of a deeply-scored track that frequently passed through long tunnels of overhanging foliage, and then across open spaces of beautiful upland scenery. At several wayside hostelries the conveyance stopped to allow us time for refreshment, or change of horses, and in that manner we steadily proceeded during several days.

It was on the afternoon of our last stage that the "Flying Cloud" drew up at a somewhat dingy-looking "general store," where the cattle were watered. Not long after the resumption of the journey our coachman suddenly brought the vehicle to a dead stop, and we discovered that one of the leaders had cast a shoe. The accident appeared to occasion much discontent, since a smith could not readily be found, but after a long delay we again proceeded. Shortly after sundown we entered one of those leafy tunnels already described, and it quickly became apparent that most of our companions evinced a certain degree of uneasiness quite surprising to the skipper and me. Our astonishment, however, was speedily increased when, suddenly, a shrill whistle reached our ears, and then the peremptory command—"Hands up, all aboard!"

Yeardley sprang to his feet. "Ay, ay," he cried, in stentorian tones, "but there ain't a blessed breath o' wind, and not a stitch set." To his amazement, however, the coach was pulled up, and in the deeply gathering gloom several horsemen, with pistols levelled at our heads, surrounded the conveyance.

All aboard immediately threw up their arms. From within the coach female voices were raised in ear-splitting shrieks. The short, decisive orders of one horseman directed the movements of his men, till, presently, the coach again moved forward, and those on board discovered that some jewellery, and much money, had changed hands, for we had been "stuck up."

For the skipper and me, the presence of our friend Conyngham proved most fortunate. He had charge of the trip, and, perhaps, guessed that some such

occurrence might arise, for upon us the bushrangers found very little worth taking, and on our companion but a few sovereigns. About an hour later we reached the end of that portion of the voyage, as next day we were to proceed in a different conveyance. Mine host at the inn expressed slight astonishment at hearing of our adventure. "It's another of Fegan's tricks," he said; "but depend upon it, a certain gentleman will claim his child one day."

"And that casting of my leader's shoe," the coachman observed, "was owing to his orders, I have no doubt."

"Why don't 'ee shoot him?" Yeardley demanded.

"He's too strong for us hereabouts," the host replied, "but he'll put his foot in it afore long."

Next morning we continued the journey. There were but some fifty miles to cover, and as all were becoming somewhat fatigued, Conyngham offered the driver of our new conveyance a reward for increased exertion. And close upon sunset a halt was called. Our gear was placed beside the road, and then our friend pointed toward a long swing-gate. "That's Luneville," he said.

Through the entrance, and along a well-kept avenue we proceeded, till there hove in sight a large two-storied house, round which stood a deep lean-to, or veranda.

Then toward us came slowly a fine-looking young man, quietly smoking; but suddenly he began to run forward, and with outstretched arms he clasped the skipper to his breast. "Father," he cried, "have you really come out in the cutter? I am so delighted you are safe."

"I did, Jack," Yeardley said, "but I lost her after all, and what's a deal worse, poor Billy Cooper and the whole crew were drowned."

"Thank God you're safe, anyhow," his son replied. "Come and see Mary and the boy."

To afford time for their first emotions to subside, Conyngham and I strolled away toward the station yard, every portion of which was well known to him. "Not the slightest change anywhere," he observed, and then suddenly—"I say, look out, here comes the master astride his old mount, neither of whom have altered a single hair."

I followed his glance, and then saw approaching a venerable-looking man astride an equally venerable-looking pony; but the chief attraction was the magnificent snow-white beard which, like a cascade, fell over the breast of the old gentleman.

"Good day, sir," Conyngham exclaimed. "I am glad to see you looking hearty."

"Why, Conyngham," the master returned cheerily, "what brings you here? I'm glad you have come. Who is the stranger?"

"My friend, sir," Conyngham explained, "and we have brought Jack a visitor."

"Come indoors, boys," our host added. "We must hear the latest news," and thereupon he hitched-up the pony to a ring beside the door, and we entered the house. In a comfortably-furnished room we found the skipper dancing on his knee a flaxen-haired child of about two years old, while to right and left sat his stalwart son and comely daughter-in-law.

Yeardley seemed so fascinated by the boy that he evidently did not hear our approach. His son, how-

ever, rose, and said quickly, "Father, let me introduce to your notice my benefactor, Mr. Wilson."

In a moment the child was on the floor, and the dear old skipper on his feet. "Glad to meet—" and then Yeardley suddenly ceased speaking. His outstretched hand dropped to his side. As his widely-dilating eyes met those of his host there passed over his features a deadly pallor. His manner and appearance denoted a severe mental shock, as from hesitating uncertainty his mind seemed to pass toward positive conviction, and during those trying and somewhat awkward transitions Wilson remained as though petrified. The latter, however, never for one moment lost his presence of mind. As the astonished skipper was about to speak, Wilson hurriedly stepped forward, and linking his arm within that of his guest, he almost dragged Yeardley from the room. That the unexpected incident proved somewhat embarrassing for those left behind goes without saying; but the friendship existing between Jack Yeardley and Conyngham speedily turned our thoughts to other channels, and afforded such occasion for laughter and a flow of pleasant conversation, that the strange meeting of our elders was almost forgotten. Indeed, during the remainder of that evening we saw nothing more of them. Next morning, however, both appeared at breakfast, and they were apparently in the best of spirits, and on terms of friendship. They had evidently agreed upon some secret understanding. Neither offered any explanation, or even alluded to the meeting of the previous day, and, of course, it was a subject upon which no questions could be asked. Conyngham and I exchanged many opinions upon the matter. Our brains

were cudgelled for some plausible explanation of the mystery; but we were at length forced to abandon conjecture, and await such elucidation of the puzzle as time or accident might afford. During the following ten days I visited almost every corner of the station, where were gathered some thousands of sheep and cattle, and then I began slowly to understand what a rich man Wilson must surely be. Who was he?—by what means had Yeardley made his former acquaintance? were thoughts ever uppermost in my mind. During those agreeable rambles through the bush, or over great tracts of open pasture, it was agreed that should Yeardley remain at Luneville I would return with Conyngham, and at his adopted township try luck in work ashore. But all our plans were suddenly capsized by a most dramatic incident.

It so happened that after an early breakfast one morning, Wilson inquired if Conyngham and I would accompany him on a short journey of about ten miles to an outlying township, where pressing business matters needed settlement. We were only too pleased to do something useful; but as I was no horseman, George decided to go on foot, as even then we could well outpace the easy-going old pony.

In Indian file we were soon jogging along through the bush-track, and the way was much enlivened by the cheery voice and yarns of my friend, while Wilson appeared in the best of health, and all three filled the air with the fragrant clouds of good tobacco smoke.

All suddenly, however, the old gentleman pulled up, and thrusting his hand within a pocket, produced a letter. "George," he said hastily, "I've forgotten

to post this letter. Will you and your friend hasten back, and tell Jack to have it sent on at once—the man might overtake the coach.”

Conyngham said something about leaving the old man alone, but Wilson laughed. “I know the place well enough,” the latter said. “You need not fear.”

We started on the run. Conyngham presently stopped.

“Didn’t you hear that noise?” he inquired.

“It was a branch snapping,” said I; but he was, of course, more intimately acquainted with noises peculiar to bush life.

“It was a shot,” he said hastily, “and it came after us down the track. Come back.”

He pulled out his revolver, and speedily outpaced me. Almost immediately afterwards the riderless old pony came staggering and blundering down the track, and then I felt convinced that Conyngham’s conjectures foreboded a disaster. On speeding past a clump of trees, I suddenly beheld a stooping form some distance ahead, and a nearer approach showed me it was a stranger, who was busily rifling the pockets of a prostrate body at his feet.

“You scoundrel!” cried I, and instantly the man turned in my direction, and raised his arm level with his eye. The same instant a tiny flash sprang out of the bush upon his right, a cloud of smoke was seen, and without a cry the murderer of poor Wilson dropped dead where he stood.

It had been a near thing for me; but with a cry of satisfaction Conyngham rushed from the bush, and then we discovered the old man lying in a pool of blood, and his papers and money scattered on the ground.

"Hurry home," my friend said quietly. "I'll stay here and guard his body."

Some two miles had been covered when I met Jack Yeardley and several men riding hard. "The pony's come home alone," Jack cried. "What's up?" and I pointed backward on the track.

Without drawing rein the men dashed off, and I then returned to the scene of the murder. The men seemed stunned, and although we knew poor Wilson was dead, Jack sent a hand galloping for medical aid.

With great consideration the dead master of Luneville was conveyed home, and when the first stunning shock of the crime had somewhat subsided, Conyngham gave Jack Yeardley the letter he had received. A mounted messenger immediately set off with the missive, and he was further directed to continue the journey to Sydney, if necessary, and return with the family solicitor. A medical man soon arrived, but, of course, his services were not needed. Jack Yeardley and his wife were almost beside themselves with grief, as, indeed, were most of the servants attached to the station, and deep were the lamentations everywhere expressed at the terrible tragedy enacted almost at their doors. The funeral was carried out with befitting solemnity, and was attended by many friends of the deceased. Then for a time we anxiously awaited the arrival of the Sydney man of law, and on his appearance all hands were requested to attend at the house, where was read aloud the last will of the deceased master of Luneville. To every servant of ten years' standing Wilson bequeathed one hundred pounds. To the agents and managers of his different pro-

perties he left considerable bequests, while to his solicitor he desired that one thousand pounds be paid. And then followed a startling announcement. With deliberation the reader of the will slowly made known that "to Thomas Yeardley of Plymouth, in the county of Devonshire, England, I do hereby will and bequeath the sum of forty thousand pounds free of legacy duty." The remainder of his wealth the testator left absolutely to his son-in-law.

It can be readily imagined with what feelings of intense satisfaction, and no slight surprise, I learned of the brave skipper's good fortune. To him I owed my very existence. Upon him my disastrous venture had brought many privations and complete ruin; yet, in spite of such behaviour, the brave-hearted fellow had never evinced toward me the least ill-feeling, nor even upbraided my foolishness.

And now I knew that a fresh start in life had been opened to him. He would no longer need to toil for daily bread, and my heartfelt congratulations were offered upon his altered prospects.

When the company had dispersed, Yeardley touched my arm. "I want your advice," he said, and thereupon I followed to his bed-room, the door of which he immediately secured.

"Now," said he, "we have much to discuss, and I greatly need your help."

"You have only to command," I said.

"Suppose a man gave 'ee a reg'lar knock-down blow, and then left 'ee a heap of money, mate, what would you do?"

"You must speak plainer, 'Tom," I replied.

"Well, I will; but you must swear to keep my secret."

"Most truly I will, skipper."

"You saw that Wilson and I were acquainted?"

"Certainly."

"Do you guess what he had once been?"

"Not the least."

"He was once my deadliest enemy, and, if possible, even worse than that. He——" Yeardley stepped noiselessly to the door and listened. He presently returned, and placing his hands round my ear, he whispered—"He was once a convict at Botany Bay!"

I started from the chair with astonishment.

"Hush!" he said. "I'll tell 'ee how it was. As young men he and my father were in love with the same woman—father won. Wilson—I mean *Taylor*, for that was his real name—swore to be avenged, and he kept his word. He was no sailor, but kept a store at the market-town eight miles from my native village. By some means he learned the secret of the lights which some of our men used when smuggling across Channel. My father did a bit in that line, and when I was about eighteen I went one voyage in the vessel—her last. We made the trip all right, and arrived off the coast one dark night. The guiding lights ashore told all was clear, so we began to discharge the cargo, never thinking of mishap.

"Suddenly, a couple of boats loomed near, but our challenge was answered, and thinking they had come to help, we took slight notice, till father cried out and tried to cut the cable. The boats were alongside in no time.

"'Surrender!' cried the preventive officer, to whom *Taylor* had betrayed our secret, and a fight ensued—father was killed.

"We were all sentenced to long terms of imprisonment. When I was free, I found that both father and mother were in the churchyard, and that Taylor himself had been shipped off as a convict to Botany Bay. It was this way. When the neighbours discovered what he had done they shunned him, and his business was ruined. Then he burned his house down—that's what people said, but as it could not be proved, Taylor secured the insurance money and left the district.

"One winter night a vessel drove ashore on the coast. In salving the cargo there were found several cases of heavily-insured *bricks*. By their marks they were eventually traced to Taylor, and then the captain confessed that he had received orders from Taylor to sink the ship at sea.

"He even acknowledged that under similar directions he had already scuttled two vessels, but had gained little from the crime. Both men were, of course, found guilty, and while the unfortunate skipper was condemned to undergo ten years' penal servitude, Taylor was sentenced to a term of twenty years' imprisonment at Botany Bay.

"He told me everything—how that terrible voyage in a convict-ship rendered him almost insane, and how he determined when free to lead a better life, and retrieve in the New World the character he had lost in the Old.

"He was liberated on a ticket-of-leave. He went to Geelong and made money there. He removed to Melbourne, and made much more. Land was at that time cheap enough in the colony, and he speedily bought up what he could. After a time he built upon his lots, and still prospered in trade.

Away at the port of Adelaide he speculated successfully, and in Sydney he owned whole streets, as our friend Conyngham stated. And all that while he held the fixed determination to compensate me, as best he could, for the injury his mad jealousy had inflicted. As his wealth increased he added steadily to the fortune he intended to bequeath, and when it had reached the sum stated in the will, Jack suddenly appeared at the station, and it seemed to the repentant man as though the Lord had answered his fervent desires. On his knees he asked for my forgiveness of his crime, and without hesitation I gave it him. I know I can trust you, mate, but no other living being must know the secret."

"Not even your son, skipper?"

"Jack must never know," he earnestly replied. "But, see here," he added, "Jack's wife wasn't Wilson's—we must still call him by that name so as not to arouse suspicion—real daughter. He had never been married, but he adopted and gave her the best education the colony could afford. She's a good young woman, and what would be gained were I to mar their happiness by raking up old sores? Anyhow, mate, you and I now know the cause of the strange mystery connected with Jack's life out here. The moment Tay—I mean Wilson—set eyes on him he knew he was a Yeardley, and that a great opportunity for redress had been offered to the reformed convict. That's the yarn," Yeardley concluded. "Now, mate, what course have you shaped out?"

"I am going back with Conyngham," said I, "to try my luck at the mines."

"He's a good man," the skipper returned thought-

fully; "but I don't see why you and I need part."

"I could not remain here, skipper."

"No more could I, mate; it's too far from the sea."

"Have I not injured you sufficiently?" I said; and he laughed pleasantly.

"Let the dead past lie," he said. "I am older and might have had more sense. Listen, I'm going home. Yes, mate, I'm going back to the old country, and I'm going to build as smart a craft as ever floated, and—by your leave—you shall be her skipper. Let us stick together, mate, will 'ee?"

I placed my hand in his. "We will, Tom," I said. In the sitting-room we found his son, the solicitor, and Mrs. Yeardley assembled.

"Well, Jack," his father exclaimed, "my mate and I have talked matters over, and we have decided upon leaving you. We're too far from the sea, and cannot get along without a whiff of salt air."

"I expected as much," Jack replied; "and Mary and I feel the need of a change as well. Indeed, she has become quite afraid of the locality, and is anxious to get away. While her father lived we promised not to leave him, but that compulsion is now removed."

"And a good, breezy voyage to England, Jack, is the best advice I can offer," the skipper returned.

"There's no place like *home*."

Just then our friend Conyngham joined the party, and his disappointment was sufficiently evident on learning the compact between myself and Yeardley.

"It's just my luck," he exclaimed, and then struck a fine poetic vein. "Yes," he added, "poor Tom

Moore was the only fellow who really understood what blighted hopes one suffers in this life.

‘ And even thus from childhood’s hour
I’ve seen my fondest hope decay ;
I never loved a tree or flower
But ’twas the first to fade away.’

Anyhow, my friends,” he added more cheerfully, “ I am happy that through me you have all met, and in the old country we may, perhaps, meet again, to spend many another happy day.”

“ Hear, hear ! ” shouted the skipper so lustily, that the alarmed Mrs. Yeardley thrust her fingers in her ears, so terrible was the voice of her father-in-law.

Tom Yeardley’s suggestions respecting his son’s movements were strongly supported by those of the family solicitor.

“ If I might express an opinion,” the latter observed, “ I should strongly advise my young client and his family to visit for a time, at least, our old city by the sea. I suppose,” he added, and turned toward Jack Yeardley, “ that you have some one about the station in whom you could place confidence to look after your interests ? ”

“ Yes,” Jack replied, “ Jimmy Carter is an honest fellow, and could well be trusted.”

“ Then,” returned the little gentleman, “ the best move you can make will be the journey to Sydney, with us as company.”

And thereupon the matter was arranged, and Mrs. Yeardley looked pleased.

Within the next few days all hands were ready for the return voyage, and in due course the up-

country coach bore us away from Luneville, where had been encountered so many agreeable and yet most painful incidents.

During the journey, Yeardley related to the worthy lawyer our adventure with the notorious bushranger, Fegan.

"A desperate character," the little gentleman replied shortly, "but I reckon his career has ended for ever."

"Do you mean that he is dead, sir?" the skipper hastily exclaimed.

"Most undoubtedly. Haven't you heard of the occurrence? Dear me, our own tragedy placed his in the shade. Well, friends, the morning I left Sydney the papers were filled with accounts of Fegan's last fight. He and his gang attacked the gold-escort coming down country, and for nearly two days quite a battle raged. At last Fegan was shot dead, and then his men lost heart—and the gold. Eight bushrangers were killed, and five troopers wounded, but the treasure was brought safely through, and so ends the yarn."

Without accident we all reached Sydney in good time, and then Jack Yeardley and his family put up at the chief hotel.

The skipper and I presently found a vessel about to sail for London, and in her I was fortunate enough to find a berth in the fore-castle, but as Jack Yeardley insisted on paying for a cabin berth home for his father, the latter—after much private grumbling at such waste of good money—settled down comfortably in her saloon.

On the morning of our departure Jack Yeardley, his wife and little boy, came down to the quay to

see us sail. Our good friend, George Conyngham, accompanied us as far as the "Heads," and with the pilot took his leave, expressing regret that I had not remained ashore, but nevertheless wishing all hands a speedy passage home.

So the *Commodore* filled away. From truck to deck she spread her snowy wings to the breeze, and soon dropped under the horizon the coast-line of Australia, where we had encountered so many adventures and hairbreadth escapes.

Hurrah! We were again safely afloat. Upon the boundless deep we felt at home, for there, at least, the bushranger and outlaw from society could do no injury to unguarded victims. Home, home, homeward bound!

CHAPTER XI

ALTHOUGH living at opposite ends of the ship, Yeardeley and I were by no means separated. During the dog-watches he frequently visited the forecastle for a smoke, or a talk, and there he speedily became a favourite among the crew. That a saloon passenger should thus act was, perhaps, somewhat resented by the officers, but as it became known that he was an old sailor, and that he had lost his vessel on the coast, no one openly objected to his behaviour.

Thus he and I had many opportunities for conversation, and one evening he related to the watch below how we had been cast away while in search of the wreck of the *Gannet*. The mention of the brig's name suddenly arrested the attention of a man who

was rolling between his hands a pipeful of tobacco. In an excited manner the sailor exclaimed—

“The *Gannet*! What do you know of her?”

In few words Yeardley stated our attempt to recover the gold from her wreck.

“Why, sir,” the man returned, “I was on board that brig. For seven years I’ve been looking for some trace of her, but have never found any. It wasn’t the gold I was after,” he added, “but the fellows that were in her.”

“Did they play you a trick?” inquired I, while becoming interested as the story of poor Burke was vividly recalled.

“Trick!” cried the sailor, “it was a deal worse than that. Say, mate, what would you think of fellows that set you adrift in the middle of the Pacific?”

“In a boat?” I inquired, and now felt assured that before me stood an accomplice in the mutiny of the *Gannet*.

“Ay, in an open boat,” the man replied. “Would you care to hear the yarn?”

“Very much,” I said.

“About nine years ago,” the man returned, “I shipped on the brig at ’Frisco. Two of the men got injured in a fight, and they became so bad that the boss decided to put them on shore, first chance. When an island hove in sight, myself and another fellow offered to pull the sick chaps ashore, for they were too weak to do it themselves. But we had scarcely stepped into the boat than the painter was cut, while the braces were let go, and the brig filled away, and there we were left six miles off shore, and not even an oar to use, since in our hurry we’d forgotten them until it was too late. Anyhow, we kept

singing out till we were nearly hoarse, and were answered by shouts of jeering laughter. As the brig disappeared, the face of my comrade was as white marble, and his eyes flashed fire.

"As the truth rose in his mind he stood upright, and with one hand above his head he swore that by day or by night, in fair weather or foul, he'd never cease tracking the fellows aboard that brig, so be it that he got safe ashore, and out of that fix alive. He was almost mad, and, only he'd left his shooter in the vessel, I b'lieve he would have killed the sick chaps.

"I had mine handy, and he knew it.

"'What are you thinking of?' says he.

"'Same as yourself,' I says. 'We'll meet those fellows yet, and cry quits.'

"'Then shake hands on that,' he says, and we did.

"The sun was beating on that sea till we were nearly blinded. As the day advanced the breeze died away, and that made things still worse. About that time I spied a thundering great shark sailing round the boat—he'd smelled out the sick fellows, and was waiting for 'em.

"Now and then the wounded leant over the side and splashed water on their heads. What to do I knew not, till all of a sudden my comrade began tearing up the bottom-boards, thinking to make paddles of 'em, so as to reach the island before sunset. While we were on that job there was a frightful yell aft. The boat heeled over till the drink poured in. We knew what had happened, but our own lives were in such peril that we flung all our weight on the weather gun'ale to check the inflow of water. With a reel the boat staggered upright. One of the sick chaps was gone, and near us the sea looked red.

"We'd told 'em to look out, but they only laughed, and that was the end of the water-dabbling. We bailed the boat dry with our boots. All day we kept paddling, but before sundown we ceased, as the boat was then some two miles off the island, round which a ring of tossing foam kept us outside till daylight. We cast for watches, and I won the first snooze. How long I'd slept is uncertain, but something stirred the boat, so I sat up and looked round. The stars shone brightly, and the long roll of the sea was as the heaving bosom of a sleeping child. The silence was awful. In a larger craft, and with fellows to talk with, you'd pass through the same thing and take no notice. But that night there was *something* in the air, or the sea, that made me feel as I'd never felt before. It made me think. Until then I had not thought there was a God, and cared less. But then it seemed as though the stars were His eyes watching us, and the silence as if He held His breath while waiting for us to speak. He had stilled the ocean while listening for our prayers. I had forgotten mine—I was scared and made no sign.

"Suddenly there ran fore and aft a trembling as though we had struck something. At first I thought we were on the reef, but getting on my knees I looked over the side, and drew back pretty smartly, you bet. Yes, I soon found out what she'd struck. All round us there were great, circular, moving streaks of phosphorescent light that rose out of the depths below, and often seemed to clash together near the surface. The water was alive with them, and when I looked outward a huge shark was at that moment forging slowly across the keel, which he sometimes touched.

"That sight took all the sleep out of me.

"My comrade was sleeping soundly in the bow, and not caring to arouse him I stretched my hand toward the sick chap, and as it touched his face I fairly yelled—it was cold as marble. My mate sprang up to inquire the cause of my fright, and then he saw those moving rings round the bow. 'The sick fellow's dead,' I whispered.

"'And *they* know it,' replied my mate excitedly. 'Bear a hand and get him out—they'll have us if you don't look spry. Hullo! What's that?'

"It was the rascally shark again rasping across the keel till I thought he'd capsize her, and I said so.

"'Are ye gripped?' he asked, as both stooped over the corpse in the stern.

"'Ay, ay.'

"'One—two—heave.'

"The body swung between us, and the boat rolled heavily to the motion. A huge phosphorescent splash in the heaving deep—streaks of light clashing wildly toward the thing we had dropped—and sinking on a thwart I shut my eyes, and buried my face in my hands. From partial forgetfulness I was aroused.

"'I say, are ye asleep?' inquired my mate.

"'No,' I said.

"'Let's have a smoke.'

"We lit our pipes. Not another word was spoken, and thus we puffed little clouds into the air till away east the dawn showed dimly.

"As daylight strengthened we saw a gap in the foaming ring ashore. On the summit of a sea we went for it. Every sinew was strained to keep her head straight for the channel. One moment she hung above what appeared as certain death, and the

next instant she was flung with terrific speed safely through, and then lay at peace in a small lagoon. The island proper was full of cocoa-nut trees, and very soon we landed on the soil, which was but a foot or two above the sea. While making for the palms there passed my ear a buzzing noise, and a spear buried its head in a tree. 'Down!' yelled my mate, and both fell among the slender undergrowth. My revolver was ready, and my mate lay close. Then a number of spears fell about us. One glanced off the revolver barrel, and slit my forearm.

"'Are ye hurt, Jack?' my mate said anxiously.

"'No, Jim, but take the shooter till I stop the bleeding—don't miss.'

"'You bet I don't.'

"There was a yell as from fiends. Towards us came leaping a score or more savages, naked as the hour they were born, and thinking, maybe, they had choked our luff for good and all.

"One nigger we noticed chiefly. He looked like the boss, and all his weight rested on one leg, while above his head a spear was balanced ready to strike.

"'Steady, Jim. Let her sing.'

"On that bronze-like figure a bead was drawn, and then the weapon flashed. Without a groan the nigger dropped—hit fairly between his eyes—and that single pellet settled the business. For the space, perhaps, of half a minute, the gang waited for their chief to rise. He made no sign, and as one man the crowd trecked toward the sea. We presently discovered some huts, and on the matting of one we knocked. A decrepit old woman appeared. We pointed to our mouths, and she brought some cocoa-nuts, the milk from which was the

grandest drink I ever had. Another door was soon opened, and from it a little pickaninny about three years old appeared. The child passed down to the sea. Then came two women bearing cocoa-nuts and baked fish, which we accepted, and made signs for peace. The men returned, and laid down their weapons. Over them we kept close watch, but while trying to make the frightened creatures understand that we meant no harm, my mate suddenly fell with a spear buried in his throat. I snatched from his hand the loaded revolver. Then wheeling round I saw a nigger in the very act of heaving at me a spear, but the next instant I had laid him out upon the soil. The rapidity of my actions, together with the noise and smoke of the weapon, scared the foe so thoroughly that they fell at my feet with howls of submission. They cleared out a hut for my use, and in it I was comfortable enough. But after the revolver, I think my pipe and bacca scared them most. They treated me fairly well, but chiefly because I held in my pocket a weapon more deadly than their own; and through it I was monarch of all I surveyed right down to the sea. There the sharks held my rule in utter disdain.

"My comrade died that evening, and I buried him under the palms. But about midnight I was suddenly aroused by a hideous shouting some distance from my hut, and thinking they were fighting, I strolled down to see the row. Fighting! No, sirce; they were merry as pickpockets. There was a big fire blazing near the sea, and round it men, women, and even the little pickaninnies were dancing, and shouting fit to wake the dead. Two men were busy over a big hole, like those the fish

were baked in. My suspicions of their treachery were aroused.

"I hastened to the grave, which was empty. In a furious passion I skipped back to the fire, and found all the niggers sitting in a circle, while two of the crowd were handing my mate round on palm leaves. Amongst them I rushed as one mad. Right and left I let them have it straight from the shoulder, but they only howled, and hung on to poor Jim all the same.

"Among them I lived two years. One day a vessel arrived off the island, and in her I reached South America. I've been to every port in New Zealand and Australia looking for the men that cast me adrift, and now I find that you two strangers have already traced her. Do you know what became of the crew?"

"They all died," I said; "the last one was almost starved in the bush, and only lived long enough to describe to a friend where the gold lay—that is all I know."

During subsequent private conversations Yeardley deemed it advisable that no further discussions respecting the lost brig should arise, but we determined that upon our arrival home we would acquaint the proper authorities of the existence of him who had participated in the cold-blooded murder on board the *Gannet*.

"Man proposes, but God disposes."

While reefing topsails one night in the Channel, the mutineer fell overboard, and was never again seen, and thus terminated the career of the last survivor of the ill-fated brig that once contained treasure stained by human blood, the touching of

which had cost the lives of so many men. There could be no doubt of God's abhorrence of the crime which once branded Cain with the curse of a just and all-seeing Creator, and with heartfelt gratitude Yeardley and I oftentimes acknowledged the mercy vouchsafed unto ourselves.

CHAPTER XII

WITHOUT accident the *Commodore* arrived home, and was moored safely in dock. Yeardley and I presently obtained convenient quarters up town, and in due course he received the forty thousand pounds bequeathed by Taylor, *alias* Wilson.

"Now, mate," he quietly observed, "I am anxious to set about the building of my ship; but before commencing anything in that line we must go down to Plymouth, and visit the families of the men lost in my cutter."

I made no immediate reply. Indeed, I was debating with myself why such a step as he suggested need be taken. We could have corresponded with the poor people, and I had no desire to witness the distress which our presence in the town would certainly arouse.

"You could write," said I.

"No," Yeardley replied. "I must see and explain to all how the loss of the men occurred, and now that I have the means for an honourable discharge of my trust I shall certainly hand to each family the amount we agreed to pay the crew."

"But I alone was responsible," I said.

"Not altogether," he returned. "Being a partner in the venture, they looked to me more than to you

for payment. But for my influence you would not have found one man to accept the risk."

"Very well, skipper, let us go down."

To each member of our late crew there had been guaranteed the sum of three hundred pounds after discovery of the treasure, and by cheque Yeardley faithfully discharged the debt, and thereby gained not a few earnest blessings from the bereaved. But to the representatives of Joseph Barber he would not pay one farthing, "It was entirely owing to his conduct," Tom said, "that the men were lost, and therefore you must stand by the consequences."

After our return to London, Yeardley's entire attention turned upon the building of his ship. With much deliberation and no slight acumen, he at length signed an agreement for the completion of a large vessel, and her keel was soon afterwards laid down. For about eighteen months subsequently, he almost lived in the dockyard, and his excitement and admiration knew no bounds when at last the new ship was ready for floating.

On a beautiful spring morning the *Luneville* slipped down the "ways," took the water like a duck, and hearty, indeed, were the congratulations upon her handsome lines and strength. When she had been masted and rigged, Yeardley occasioned me some surprise. "Of course," said he, "I once asked you to become captain of my ship. Since then I have changed my mind. You must stop ashore, mate. You are a good scholar, and can look after the financial side of the business. I have never had any education to speak of, but I know a good ship, and I know her needs. Now, mate, is there any one you could recommend as her skipper?"

"I met my old captain yesterday," I said, "and he is looking out for a vessel. You may recollect my stating how his nephew ousted me from a good berth: that same nephew ran a ship down in the Channel, and both vessels were lost."

"Could you trust this captain?"

"With my life, Tom. A better sailor does not exist."

"Then fetch him along," the skipper said, and it is almost needless to add that I lost no time in seeking out the address of my old captain.

Next day, Captain Spanker appeared in our office. He seemed a little flurried, not to say shamefaced, but his chief astonishment was occasioned by my apparent authority in such well-furnished and busy apartments.

Yeardley happened to be in the private room, and to him Spanker was introduced. "How-d'-do, sir?" the latter exclaimed, somewhat nervously, and promptly dropped, with some noise, his heavy umbrella. "Glad to make your acquaintance."

"Sir," Yeardley gravely replied, "my partner, Mr. Martin, has recommended your appointment to our ship. We shall be pleased should you take charge, and we hope you will find her a fast and comfortable vessel."

There was in Spanker's eyes an appearance as if he were facing a heavy breeze. "Sir," said he earnestly, "I thank you heartily for the trust, and all I can say is this—if I don't make your clipper skip my name's not Spanker."

After some further conversation, I conducted him to the outer offices, where the gallant old sea-dog immediately seized my buttonhole. "He—he," pointing towards Yeardley's room, "called you his *partner*," he whispered.

"Well," I replied, "we *are* on that footing here."

The eyes of my companion were widely opened. His brows were elevated to their utmost altitude. He dragged from his pocket a huge bandana, with which he slowly squeeze-geed his brow, and then exclaimed, thoughtfully, "Well, I'm ——! Beg pardon, but—er—I really *can't* believe it." And with that he sped away.

A fortnight later, the *Luneville* left the river, and speedily returned home with a full cargo of Australian wool. That was the beginning of our success. Several other vessels were added to the fleet, but owing to the rapid advancement of marine engineering all our later vessels were driven by steam, and on one occasion Spanker declared that seamanship was "going to the dogs," since all one now had to do was to turn a handle and then go below and turn in. "Screaming pot-boilers I call 'em, sir," he said to Yeardley.

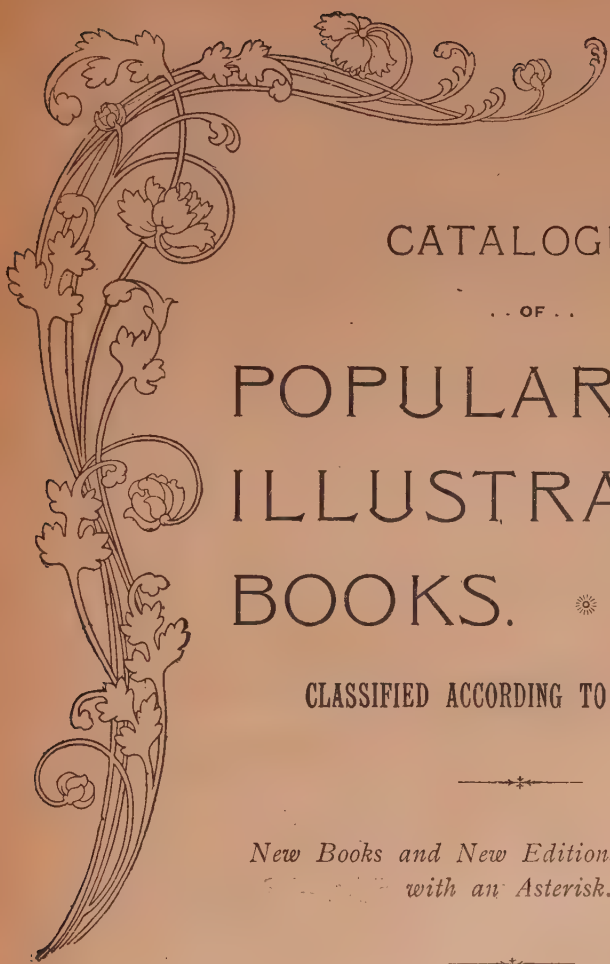
So greatly did our trade expand that Captain Spanker had to remain on shore, so that Yeardley should be relieved of increasing responsibility.

But one day, while at the docks, I made a splendid discovery. Ahead of our vessel lay a foreign steamer, and in her captain I recognised the coward who had abandoned to their death the people on board the *Moonbeam*. The owners of the latter vessel speedily seized the foreigner, and although substantial damages were obtained, they could not, of course, heal the many aching hearts sorrowing for the loss of their beloved, sleeping fathoms deep at sea.

In due time, Jack Yeardley and his family returned to England. Tom and I met them at Southampton, and in the quaint old Hampshire

port we passed many delightful hours, and then all hands returned to town. Our friend George Conyng-ham also came to England for a time, but his affairs soon compelled his return to Sydney, whence we frequently hear from the honest and faithful companion of many a ramble in the bush. He is married, and has a large family. But although his success has been great, I have never yet regretted the decision made in favour of the partner of many a weary hour spent on board the *Mary Jane* in her long voyage half round the world, instead of a mining camp in New South Wales. Jack Yeardley became an exceedingly wealthy man. The shrewd speculations of his father-in-law proved even more valuable than Wilson could have supposed, since the properties bought for "an old song," as the saying goes, have since realised almost fabulous prices, so rapid has been the progress of the energetic English race transplanted to the shores of Australia.

Young Jack Yeardley has grown into a fine specimen of the true "corn-stalk." He is now a captain in a cavalry regiment. Of him I see little, but in company of his son and still comely daughter-in-law, Tom Yeardley frequently recalls some of those stirring incidents connected with our attempt to recover the treasure, once lost and twice found, on the shores of Woody Bay.



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